MIKHAIL BUBENNOV

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A Novel

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Out in the field the birch tree stood
Combing her curls in the field she stood....

* * *

Wounded by an axe-blade, silver birch is weeping
Down her silver birch bark, silver tears are creeping.
Don't you cry my birch tree; honey, do not sorrow,
This will not be fatal; it will heal tomorrow.

AL. K. TOLSTOY

PART ONE

I

The leaves came rustling down. Sadly, submissively, the forests were shedding their scarlet foliage. The leaves showered down almost incessantly, even when there was no wind. A melancholy rustle held sway in the sylvan fastnesses, drowning out every other sound. All the forest creatures had shrunk into hiding until better times; all but the magpies, who chattered shrilly and lightheartedly on their swaying perches in the naked treetops.

Autumn had lavishly strewn the roads and forest clearings with fallen leaves. Gusts of wind lifted clouds of dead leaves into the lofty reaches

of the air, swirled them about and then carried them east; at such times a scarlet storm seemed to be raging over the dismal autumn land.

The rustle of the falling leaves filled Andrei's heart with anxiety and anguish. He trailed along wearily in his faded tunic, with coat roll and rifle slung over his shoulder, frequently wiping his dusty face with his garrison cap. At times his legs felt so shaky that he was surprised to find himself still marching. Autumn that year had burst upon his native district, so rich in gay summer colours, at the appointed time, yet somehow Andrei regarded its advent as particularly sudden and bold. He could not bear to see the cruel force of autumn triumphing everywhere—in the sparkling, gilded woods, in the bare, empty fields.

At noon Andrei halted on the crest of a hill, straightened up to his full height over the withered grass and with an effort surveyed the country around. Crowds of soldiers were plodding dejectedly through the hollows. The roads were filled with columns of trucks and carts rumbling along in a thick screen of dust. In the autumn sky German planes were droning eastward, their greyish-yellow wings glistening in the sun; they swooped down on the roads, screaming, and the earth shuddered heavily, and ragged black plumes of smoke soared up. For some reason Andrei felt that his battalion had lost its way in the midst of that wind

and groaning and rumbling. Wiping his face with his cap, he shouted:

"Say, are we going right?"

The squad leader, Sergeant Matvei Yurgin, a tall, swarthy, reserved Siberian, understood what Andrei meant, but he answered bitterly:

"We're not going the way we should, but what can we do about it?"

"Where to now? This way?"

"Follow me!"

They were withdrawing along small country roads and at times across roadless tracts, straying in the dark and swampy woodland of the Rzhev area. Here, however, other units had already passed. At times they came upon scattered army equipment: rifles, grenades, knapsacks, gas masks, helmets.... On a sudden impulse Andrei quickly gathered up sundry articles. Matvei Yurgin halted when he noticed Andrei's burden.

"What are you carrying that for?" he asked in surprise.

Andrei dumped his collection of battered equipment and weapons on the ground. He stared at it, wondering what had made him carry all that weight, and said reproachfully:

"Look—they're throwing it away!"

Matvei Yurgin caught him by the arm.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked anxiously.

Andrei did not answer the question. "See what an autumn it is?" he whispered. "There's never been one like it here."

"It's a noisy autumn. . . ."

"A frightening autumn," Andrei rejoined in a whisper.

"You're ill," Yurgin declared with conviction.

Just off the road, on the slope of a little rise, stood a lone birch sapling with a tender, satiny white bark. The young birch was shaking its branches with childish glee, as if bidding a rapturous greeting to the sun; and the wind, playing with the tree, was gaily counting the tinkling ducat gold of its foliage. A faint luminescence, as from some magic lamp, seemed to be glowing from the leaves. There was something vivacious, even pert, about the lone tree, and the soldiers called out to it fondly as they passed:

"Hey, you pretty thing, come along with us!"

The birch caught Andrei's eye, and when he noticed the vitality surging in it from base to crown he felt that nature herself had granted it the right to stand in that field through the ages. Abruptly he turned off the road. He walked up to the birch. Its marvelous glow refreshed his face—and all of a sudden he felt something bursting in his chest. . . .

Andrei had loved birches since childhood. He loved to watch them in the spring when they awakened and began to grope in the air with their

naked branches; he loved to inhale the odour of their dew-drenched leaves at dawn; he loved to watch their rustling dance in a ring around glades, to watch them reach out their heavily-frosted arms toward windows and rock red-breasted bullfinches on their boughs....

Matvei Yurgin called to Andrei from the road. Andrei neither turned nor answered; he was hurriedly unshouldering his coat roll. Yurgin strode back to him and asked in a strange, hoarse voice, his eyes narrowing:

"What's the matter, trying to fall behind?"

Andrei gave the sergeant a strange look.

"How long will this go on?" he said, leaning forward. "How long?"

Yurgin had never seen him in such a state. Andrei was a quiet, easygoing soldier; a steady vernal light always shone in his bright, crystal-clear eyes. What had come over him? A dark, dry flush burned in his handsome, thoughtful face, there was mute anguish in his tear-filled eyes, and his sun-cracked lips were trembling.

"How far?" he whispered vehemently.

Now Yurgin understood. "Come, come," he said in a softer voice. "We've got commanders for that. They know. When they give the order we'll make a stand. What's the matter?"

Andrei had suddenly dropped to the ground beside the birch. He sat there motionless for a

minute with his hands over his eyes. Then he looked up at the west. The entire horizon was shrouded in a dark purplish haze through which flashes of light were streaking; over the dismal autumn fields the storm of leaves raged unceasingly.

"Why did they come here?" Andrei asked with anguish in his voice. "Why?"

Yurgin made no reply, knowing that Andrei did not expect one. He picked up the coat roll from the ground. Then, without turning to look east, where a dark fir wood stood, Andrei confided:

"On the other side of that wood is Olkhovka."

"Your village?" Yurgin asked, surprised.

"Yes. . . ."

Andrei sat motionless by the birch a minute more, his hands over his eyes. . . .

II

The battalion marched a long time through the dense wood. Within the wood there was the oppressive smell of dampness and of still air. By the sides of the swampy road mossy firs tossed their nets of needles high into the sky. Under the firs, bowing feebly, stood scraggly rusty alders that had never seen the sun. In the drowsy glades and openings lay stagnant swamps with smelly reddish water.

Late in the afternoon the battalion emerged from the wood, and the men saw a spacious elevation with a sizable village standing on it. This was Olkhovka. All over the village grew tall, leafy birches; their satiny bark emitted a soft, radiant glow that suffused the entire hilltop. The men quickened their steps. As soon as they climbed the slope many of them dropped down to rest beside the wattle fences of the outlying cottages. A large group, canteens in hand, clustered around a well at the edge of the village.

Andrei also headed for the well. His face was coated with dust, and reflections of the flashes streaking across the dark western sky seemed to be flickering in his eyes. Matvei Yurgin filled Andrei's canteen for him out of turn. Andrei took a few noisy swallows, then lowered the canteen and looked at the village. The Olkhovka water had revived him. He felt steadier on his feet than he had the whole day. And now that he was in Olkhovka the thoughts which had been tormenting him on the way became superfluous and vanished of their own accord. He must content himself with the little that life begrudgingly granted; not on everyone did she bestow even this.

Matvei Yurgin leaned against a fence as he screwed on the cap of his canteen. "You have good water here," he remarked appreciatively with his habitual restraint.

"I'd know it anywhere," Andrei answered. "That drink just now made me remember everything.... I don't know what's happened to me: I feel refreshed, and on fire inside at the same time."

"Don't," Yurgin said glumly. "Take care of your heart."

"Let it burn," Andrei rejoined meditatively.

Yurgin hooked his canteen to his belt. "There's the battalion commander. Ask him to let you step in home," he advised Andrei. "Only see you don't stay long."

Andrei sprang away from the fence. "Where is he?"

Several horsemen had ridden up from the village. Ahead on a sweating bay, his trench coat flung open, rode Senior Lieutenant Loznevoi, the battalion commander. The lieutenant had come to the battalion a short while before, after the death of the old commander. He had a lean, narrow face with a thin hooked nose; in the shadow of the long visor of his crimson-edged cap a pair of wary grey eyes shone with a cold steely glitter. His features were frozen into a disgruntled expression which rarely changed; and when he did smile it was a crooked smile, with the left side of his face only.

Andrei was afraid of the new battalion commander. But now, oblivious of everything, he strode up to him with unusual determination. Rein-

ing in his horse Loznevoi had turned in his saddle and with a gloved hand, from the wrist of which hung a Cossack whip with a carved crop, was pointing out something in the west to the other horsemen.

"Comrade Battalion Commander, Comrade Battalion Commander!" Andrei called out in what sounded like a burst of despair.

Loznevoi turned about sharply, his saddle squeaking.

"What's the matter? What are you shouting about?"

Andrei recoiled from the horse.

"This is my village. My home is here, Comrade Battalion Commander!" he burst out in confusion. "May I step in? I'll catch up!"

"Where's the house?" Loznevoi asked in a stern, suspicious tone.

"Way over at the other end. See those two birches?"

Loznevoi put his palm to the visor of his cap and looked in the direction Andrei indicated. The sun shone full on one side of his face and on his beaked nose. He did not see Andrei Lopukhov's house but he pretended he did.

"Will there be something to eat?" he asked, as though joking.

"Why of course, Comrade Battalion Commander. All you want."

"Lead the way!" Loznevoi commanded suddenly. He took up the reins and turned to the other riders. "We'll spend the night here. Khmelko, billet the men. Kostya, come with me!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!" The orderly prodded his horse.

A tumult of anxious voices, the squeaking of carts and the bellowing of cattle hung over Olkhovka. Many of the villagers were boarding up their windows. Frantically and vociferously women were loading sacks and bundles done up in coarse coloured cloth into carts, seating howling children in them, and thrusting in tubs, oven forks and pokers on all sides. Shrill voices rang out over the farmsteads.

"Load away, women! See, the army is still marching!"

"Lord, if we could only set out by nightfall!"

"Hurry up there, women, what are you stopping for?"

A flush spread under the heavy tan of Andrei's cheeks. All of a sudden he felt so hot that he pulled off his cap and wiped his temples with it. "They're leaving," he realized.

While retreating with his unit Andrei had already passed through many villages, large and small—and everywhere he had seen the same thing: in restless, inconsolable grief-stricken crowds the people were abandoning birthplace and home,

abandoning all that was dear to their hearts, what they had known for generations, and, cursing the Germans, were moving east. On all the roads and along all the roadless tracts he had traversed he had seen uprooted people seeking salvation in flight. But only now, when he saw what was happening in his native Olkhovka, did Andrei realize the full import of the calamity; it was as if from here, from this lofty Olkhovka hill, his eyes had in a flash encompassed the broad expanses of his homeland. "What about my folks? Maybe they've left already too?" Andrei thought all of a sudden. "Dammit, will I find them at home?" This thought spurred him on. He walked as fast as he could, swinging his cap in his hand; as he walked along he took in with naive excitement the familiar sights of his village.

Battalion Commander Loznevoi rode his horse at a walk slightly behind Andrei, keeping his eyes on him for a long time. During his week in the battalion there had already been several cases of soldiers asking "to step in home." He had seen no other men who spoke of their homes with such agitation, yearning and pleading. It depressed him every time.

"Look at him run," he remarked, turning to his orderly.

"Like the wind," the orderly replied in a singsong voice.

"He's even forgotten about the war, eh?"

Kostya prodded his horse and brought it neck to neck with his commander's. Kostya was a fair-haired young fellow—very young, with shoulders that were still boyish and with soft lips which still retained a carefree childish warmth. Grinning artlessly from ear to ear, he rejoined in a gay, artless voice:

"The war? He's got no time for that now."

"See the panic in the village?"

"How can I help but see it! Everybody's running!"

"The army, too," Loznevoi added glumly.

The Lopukhov house stood at the edge of the village, overlooking the steep eastern slope of the picturesque hill. From here the Lopukhovs were the first in Olkhovka to see the sun, rested after the night, rise with majestic serenity over the dense Rzhev forests. The farmstead occupied an old hereditary site, but practically everything on it had been built anew in recent years. Time and the elements had only slightly weathered the spacious peasant house with the wooden roof. On its cornices and in the attic windows shaggy-footed white pigeons calmly sat preening themselves and gazing up into the sky. Beyond the sturdy rail fence and the gateway with its two birdhouses, solid, rationally-placed outbuildings were visible.

Everything bore the mark of a strong, efficient and loving hand and looked as if it had been made to stand forever.

Already from a distance Andrei saw that the house had not been abandoned like others in the village, and turning to Loznevoi from the crest of a small rise he caught his breath sharply and called out:

"They're home! We're in time!"

With these words he broke into a run down the little slope, the messtin and helmet on his back jangling. Without waiting for the battalion commander he threw open the gate. Reeling, he spread his arms out and called in a muffled voice: "Marika!"

From the depths of the yard came a woman's ecstatic cry. Loznevoi reined in his horse by the fence and looked into the yard. On the raised entrance to the barn stood a slim-waisted black-eyed young woman in a cherry-coloured cotton dress. She stood for an instant in confusion, convulsively pressing her hands to her high breast. then gave another cry, dashed headlong from the barn and flung herself, limp and lifeless, on the broad shoulders of Andrei, who had stepped forward to meet her. Loznevoi froze in his saddle. "His wife! Dash it, what a beauty! And look at how she loves him!" It was a few seconds before he could tear his admiring gaze from her.

A plump little woman in a hand-knitted grey wool jacket came out on the porch. She walked down in cautious haste, halting on each step.

"Lord!" she exclaimed. "Andryusha, my son!"

From behind the shed leaped a blond youngster whose broad frame instantly stamped him a Lopukhov. He threw a glance at Andrei, who was still embracing his wife, cried out "Bro-ther!" at the top of his lungs and dashed forward.

They all gathered around Andrei, who had been instantaneously transformed by the meeting with his family; his tanned, weatherbeaten face was wreathed in smiles, and his gentle, crystal-clear eyes brimmed with spring sunlight. They embraced him with exclamations and tears, oblivious of the strangers at the gate. Even the vicious-looking black watchdog forgot his duty and yelped and frisked about the family group.

"Now, now, that's enough," Andrei said at last. "Dammit, what are you crying about?"

Loznevoi dismounted. He handed Kostya his reins and whip, took off his cap, wiped his lean face with a handkerchief and quickly smoothed down his crumpled, ashen-brown, faded-looking hair. Casting another glance at Marika, he whispered to Kostya, "He didn't run for nothing!"

Kostya caught his meaning. "Flashy," he replied admiringly.

The first to recover was the dog, Blackie, who, sensing strangers, looked toward the gate and gave a short bark. Realizing that his battalion commander was looking on, Andrei felt awkward and began to free himself gently from the embraces of his family.

"Come now, that's enough. Where's father?"

Marika knitted her brows. "Oh, father!"

"What's the matter? Where is he?"

"Over there, in the vegetable garden. . . ."

"What's wrong here?" Andrei asked anxiously.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," his mother put in quickly. She touched her younger son on the shoulder. "Vasyatka, run over and tell him. Has he gone deaf there or what?"

Andrei gathered that there had been some sort of quarrel in the house. He stopped his brother.

"Wait, Vasyatka, I'll go myself," he said. Then he turned to the gate. "Comrade Battalion Commander, what are you standing there for? Come here. Ah, excuse me! It's high time I—"

"I'll wait, I'll wait," said Loznevoi, entering the yard. "You go where you have to."

"Mama, Marika, this is our Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Go ahead, go ahead, we'll make the introductions ourselves."

At close sight everything about Marika suddenly seemed familiar to Loznevoi: the tight black

braids fixed in a crown on her proud head; the soft, pretty face lit up by animation; the faint, ruddy glow under the tan of her cheeks; the lips, as full as a child's and ready at any moment to break into a smile, and the dark eyes shining with happiness. Somewhere, at some time, he had seen her, and very often at that. But where? When? Or had he only dreamed of someone like her? Loznevoi was even somewhat confused by this sudden impression received from his meeting with Marika. Lowering his eyes, he put his fingers to his cap.

"Peace to this house."

Alevtina Vassilievna bowed. "Welcome."

But Marika, taking in the guest with a quick glance, answered, without knowing why herself, mockingly and impertinently:

"What peace? The war is knocking at our gates! We had peace, but it's gone.... You ought to fight better!"

"Lord, Marika!" Alevtina Vassilievna fluttered. "What a thing to say! Go put up the samovar. Oh dear, is that the way to behave?"

"She's got a sharp little tongue!" Loznevoi remarked in embarrassment, following Marika to the porch with his eyes.

"She certainly has!"

He watched her slowly climb the steps without turning, the muscles of her long brown legs flexing smoothly. In front of the door she shrugged

her right shoulder and tossed her proud head, as though casting off an annoying thought.

"Yes, she's sharp! . . ." Loznevoi said when she disappeared in the passageway without having turned as he had wanted her to. But now there was a puzzled note in his voice.

. . . Beyond the shed, in a corner of the vegetable garden, under a spreading mountain ash whose leaves had turned an ominous reddish colour, was a hole, and next to it a heap of black earth. Damp, clayey clods were flying out of the hole and over this heap to the wall of the shed. Andrei gathered at once that his father was out of sorts. "Dammit, what have they quarrelled about?" he wondered as he strode over the rows of withered cucumber vines. At the sound of footsteps nearby Erofei Kuzmich, Andrei's father, stopped digging, straightened up inside the hole and, realizing that one of the family was approaching, asked anxiously:

"Who's over there? What's going on in the yard?"

"It's me," said Andrei, coming up to the hole.

"Andrei? Really? Is that you?"

Like the other members of the household, Erofei Kuzmich was both surprised and overjoyed by his son's unexpected arrival. Yet so gripped was he by some thought of his own that he neither released his spade nor climbed out of the hole,

"I'll finish digging," he said to himself, "and then I'll climb out." A robust, broad-shouldered man in a long, loose, unbelted blue blouse stained with perspiration at the back, he stood there in the hole, barefooted for some reason, his broad, old-fashioned blond beard uplifted, looking out with frowning, slitted, quick grey eyes. After inspecting his son in the unfamiliar army uniform and evidently reaching some secret conclusion about him, he heaved a brief, sad sigh.

"Well, so you've finished fighting?"

Andrei sat down at the edge of the hole. "We're withdrawing meanwhile."

"And then?"

Andrei held a lump of cool earth in his palm for a moment and then slowly crushed it. Deliberately, in a flat voice, he said, "Then I suppose we'll return."

"Come back? But will you?"

Andrei made no reply. He gazed reflectively for a while at the mountain ash; the sunlight was playing on its reddish leaves and clusters of berries.

"What's the hole for?"

The answer came unwillingly. "For our possessions."

"And what about yourselves?"

"Well?"

"When are you leaving?"

Now Erofei Kuzmich was silent for a while, and Andrei felt that he was restraining his irritation with difficulty as he leaned on his spade and looked up out of the hole. He was breathing heavily, his nostrils dilating.

"Where to?" he said suddenly with his habitual bluster, although he had not wanted to use that tone in talking to his son now. "Well, you tell me: where to? Into the wilderness? And leave the house?"

Shining beads of perspiration broke out on Andrei's forehead. Wiping his face with his cap, he glanced around, as if looking for someone to continue this conversation with his father in his place. Carts began to rattle down the hillside past the vegetable garden. Women talking in shrill voices walked by in single file near the fence.

"Just the same," Andrei said softly, "you ought to go. Look, all the kolkhoz people are leaving."

"Telling me what to do? You're all so smart!" Erofei Kuzmich lost control of himself and gave full vent to his irritation. "Your better half is yelling her head off all the time too! But what about the house? What about our things? Does she think about that?"

"Just the same," Andrei repeated stubbornly.

With a quick angry glance at his son Erofei

Kuzmich raised his spade with one hand and jabbed it viciously into the earth.

"That's that!" he said. "And that's all there is to it!"

III

All through his youth Erofei Kuzmich had worked as a hired hand for wealthy farmers of the locality, and longest of all for Polikarp Dryagin, a hard, grasping man who was successful in everything he undertook. By the modest standards of the Rzhev area Polikarp Dryagin had a large farm; he had five horses, a stable full of small livestock, and a water mill. Although Dryagin was a surly, closefisted master who paid less than the others, Erofei Lopukhov came to him every spring.

"What draws you to that house?" the villagers used to ask him. "He pinches every penny!"

"That's him!" Erofei would agree heartily.

"Then why do you work for him?"

"Can't help it!"

Being Dryagin's hired man meant a hard life, but still it was to him that Erofei went, and he went with a purpose: he secretly studied the latter's methods of shady dealing. It was Dryagin, with his high and unhampered style of living, who fired the dreams of wealth in the immature mind of the penniless farmhand. Erofei was a strong,

handsome, capable young fellow, the envy of the entire village. He early became aware of this, and was proud of himself. Looking at the withered, wolfishly lean Dryagin, Erofei thought sneeringly, "Am I any worse than him? Why should I have to live the way I do? No, I'm not that sort! I won't live that way—and that's that!" His dreams of wealth gave him no rest. All the while he worked for Dryagin he studied the ways by which the latter quickly expanded his farm, like a campfire he was skilfully building up and fanning high. He envied Dryagin with all his heart and took sincere delight in every success he achieved.

"Look at Dryagin!" he used to say to the villagers, almost with pride. "There's a fast one! He grabbed another strip of land this year! See that, eh? Getting richer all the time, our Dryagin is, getting richer!"

When he drew his pay in the late autumn he would tell his neighbours in disappointment, but with envious admiration:

"What a low skinflint that Dryagin is! In the spring we came to terms, but when payday rolled around he cheated me. I argued all I could, but just the same he cheated me! And there's nothing you can say about it! He twisted me around his finger! And the smart way he did it—it's just a wonder! Oh, he knows how to get along, our Dryagin does! He certainly knows how!"

During his long years as a hired man Erofei managed somehow to acquire a horse and a cow and set up a little place of his own. Then he got married and became his own master—with dizzying dreams of wealth.

The hard Dryagin school did not yield results, however. Erofei worked day and night, and he resorted to every possible manoeuvre to expand the farm. But no—nothing came of it. Some spiteful will seemed to be turning everything against him: a wolf killed his colt, then a hailstorm ruined the wheat crop, then his cow strayed and was sucked up by the swamp, then a fire razed the house. To top it all, his wife went and gave birth to three daughters in a row. And what good were daughters to a peasant? He did not receive an extra share of land for them. They had to be brought up, and a dowry put away for them besides. Disappointed in his fierce yearning for a prosperous life, Erofei Kuzmich often got drunk. "Damn this damned life!" he would roar as he staggered about the house. "Just can't get ahead! No ray of hope. How long will this go on?"

Erofei Kuzmich remained poor right up to the Revolution. In the first year of Soviet power he was given more land, a horse, and building lumber. And then his dreams of wealth revived with greater intensity.

"What a government!" he bellowed for all Olkhovka to hear. "It's ours! Ours! With that government, men, we'll get along fine!"

Soon after, Andrei was born. Erofei Kuzmich's spirits soared. Andrei grew up a quiet, good-natured boy, but he was strong and industrious. While still a boy he began to do all the farm chores, and most efficiently at that. Erofei Kuzmich's heart beat faster with joy; the farm was improving rapidly, and there were hopes that his cherished dream might soon come true.

But then the organization of kolkhozes began. To the surprise of many, Erofei Kuzmich, who had always been a poor peasant before the Soviet period, when he got on his feet, flatly refused to join the kolkhoz. He stubbornly held out on his beloved little farmstead, like on an island amidst the spring high waters. One year passed, then another, but he continued to hold back. At last he suddenly disappeared from the village—went off to seek his fortune elsewhere.

For about three years he roamed along the upper reaches of the Volga. It was rumoured that he was a drayman in Rzhev, then a tanbark purchasing agent, then a timber rafter.... The Olkhovka folk had already decided that the self-willed Erofei Kuzmich had broken completely with his home and the land. Then one day he returned, as suddenly as he had left, in a tattered jacket,

sullen, aged by his wanderings; he was recognized only by his trim blond beard.

To his family he explained his return briefly:

"It's a big world, but there's nowhere to go. It's the same everywhere."

By then the Lopukhovs had already been in the kolkhoz a long time, but Erofei Kuzmich did not reproach his family for violating his orders. During his wanderings Andrei had grown into a big, strong, handsome fellow—the type the Lopukhovs were noted for. He was respected in the kolkhoz for his straightforwardness, his good nature and his industry. No matter what the job, he put his heart into it. All the villagers had become accustomed to considering him the head of the household. Erofei Kuzmich expected Andrei, who had matured during his absence, to balk at his stern paternal rule. But he turned out to be as retiring, good-natured and gentle as before; he had inherited much of his mother's character.

"Well, how are things going, old man?" Erofei Kuzmich asked, sizing up his son. Andrei stood shyly before his father on the threshold, his tufty blond head lowered. "How are you managing the place? How's your work going? Well, why don't you say something?"

"I'm working," Andrei replied haltingly.

But Alevtina Vassilievna, with proud glances at her son, produced his little grey workday rec-

ord book from the bureau and placed it before her husband.

"Here, look! Here's his work!"

Then she added reproachfully, in a low, sobbing voice:

"Everybody here seems to be flourishing!"

When Erofei Kuzmich had taken a good look around Olkhovka he saw that quite a different life had indeed begun there. Many of the villagers were building new houses. All had plenty of stock of their own.

Erofei Kuzmich did not conceal his chagrin from his family. "Damn it, there's luck for you!" he swore. "See what's happened? Who the devil knew that the kolkhoz would get along like that?"

There was nothing for it but to give in. Erofei Kuzmich joined the kolkhoz and to everybody's surprise he began to work industriously: he had to get into favour with the kolkhoz members, win their confidence and, before old age broke him, make up for the years of aimless wandering. And soon the Lopukhovs became prosperous; they caught up with everybody who had joined the kolkhoz earlier.

Then the war broke out. The German hordes advanced into the interior of the country. A period of oppressive uncertainty set in for Erofei Kuzmich. He became silent and gloomy, especially after Andrei went off to the army. It was difficult

to gather what he thought about the war. Sometimes after listening to the war bulletin he would make a wry face and wave his hand.

"Blockheads! Have they gone crazy?"

But the next day, after listening to the new bulletin, he would contract his bushy eyebrows and sigh.

"Yes, advancing all the time.... It's past my understanding! What will happen?"

At the beginning of October the German forces delivered a strong, sudden blow, breached the central front over a broad sector and quickly moved toward Moscow. By that time all the kolkhoz livestock in Olkhovka had been driven off to the east. The kolkhoz members, however, were in no hurry to leave home; they kept hoping the enemy would now be checked. But suddenly our troops began to stream back along all the roads. Then the Olkhovka folk took to panicky flight from their native village.

Erofei Kuzmich also decided to leave, but when he started packing his heart contracted with pain. How could he take along all his possessions in one wagon? At every step he came upon something that had to be left behind: various carpenter's tools, brand-new pickling tubs, the beehives, the geese.... But would he ever be able to acquire all that again? No, Erofei Kuzmich knew how hard it was to come by such possessions. And

he arrived at a sudden and firm decision to remain in the village.

"No, I can't do it!" he said to the family, clutching at his heart.

His whole family—his wife, Marika, and even Vasyatka—tried their best to persuade him to go, but he remained adamant. After a stormy quarrel with them all, and with Marika especially, he strode out to the vegetable patch to dig a hole in which to hide his valuables.

It was here that his son found him.

IV

Andrei got married in the spring, shortly before the war. To many his marriage with Marika came as a surprise. And at first Andrei himself could not believe in his luck.

All Andrei's coevals were daring, venturesome and boisterous youths; with them around, it was always gay and lively in the village. This made the quiet and bashful Andrei stand out all the more in their midst.

The Olkhovka girls respected Andrei, as did everyone else in the village. But naturally they liked to make fun of the quiet fellows, Andrei included. Their ringleader in mischief was usually Marika Logova, widow Anfissa Markovna's daughter. Marika, a dark, vivacious beauty with

the voice of a nightingale, was the most attractive girl in Olkhovka. It seemed as though by common agreement all her girl friends had given to her alone the major share of their beauty and vivacity and, thus lavishly endowed, she was the pride and joy of the entire village.

One hot summer day Andrei was building a booth for the watchman of the kolkhoz vegetable gardens. Toward evening the girls of the gardening brigade visited him on the way from the river after watering the vegetables. The first to approach the booth, inside which Andrei was at work with his axe, was Marika. A full pail of water swayed at either end of her yoke.

"Andrei!" she sang out slyly.

Andrei peeped out of the booth. "Eh? Well, what's up?"

"Like a drink?"

"Guess I would. Is it muggy!"

While Andrei, his forelock dangling, drank from one of the pails, Marika kept her mischievous gaze fixed on his sweaty back. The instant he straightened up she splashed water on him from the other pail.

"Up to your tricks again!" was all Andrei had time to say.

At a sign from Marika the girls rushed up from all sides and, jumping up and down and squealing, began to pour water over him. Andrei did not

move. His high forehead became all plastered with wet hair. His soaked shirt clung tightly to his straight shoulders and broad chest. During those few seconds it became particularly evident how much calm, and no doubt affectionate, strength he possessed. He did not get angry at the girls. He only shielded himself with his arms while they splashed water on him.

"Come, that's enough playing around!" he pleaded in embarrassment. "Girls, that's enough!"

"Pour!" commanded Marika.

"There, dammit, you've got the best of me!"

That was the beginning. Each new day brought further tricks.

"He'll be getting married," Erofei Kuzmich rejoiced when he heard about it.

Erofei Kuzmich had long since decided that his son should get married. All the young men Andrei's age had already celebrated their weddings. And it was to Andrei's advantage as well to set up a family. He had not served in the army: he had caught cold while rafting timber, had received an illness deferment at the time of the draft, and had remained in the kolkhoz. But for some reason Andrei was in no hurry about marrying. This irritated Erofei Kuzmich. Life in the kolkhoz was going along fine, and he reasoned thriftily that an extra pair of hands in the house would mean extra wealth.

But the summer passed and winter—the wedding season—came and still his son did not broach the topic. When, at the end of the winter, Andrei turned twenty-three, Erofei Kuzmich lost his patience.

"Well, Andrei, enough stalling!" he said firmly one morning a week after the birthday. "Do you hear?"

"What's the matter, Pa?"

Erofei Kuzmich flared up. "He asks yet! Huh! Get married! And that's all there is to it!"

Andrei was filling cartridges in preparation for grouse shooting. After a pause he answered glumly, "I'll wait."

"What for?" Erofei Kuzmich shouted. "Well, tell me, what for? Your mother's run off her feet all by herself! All over the house there's chores undone!"

"I'll wait a while."

"Damn it! Lord, what a punishment! Do you still expect to grow some more, eh? No, there's nothing to wait for!"

Despite all Erofei Kuzmich's arguments his son did not consent to get married. At last he realized that he was wasting his time and decided to act in the old-fashioned way. Just then Grandpa Silanty happened to be walking past the house. Erofei Kuzmich invited him in.

"There's a very important matter, Grandpa!" he

said worriedly. "It's very urgent! A match has to be arranged. Can you do it, Grandpa? Haven't forgotten how?"

Grandpa Silanty checked the trembling of his head for a minute and with difficulty fixed his faded eyes on Erofei Kuzmich.

"A match? Arrange a match? Why, Erofei, we'll be the laughingstock of the whole kolkhoz!"

"What's there to laugh about, Grandpa? This is no laughing matter. What's wrong, say, about going and having a talk with people? You can do that, can't you?"

Grandpa shook with laughter. "Ho, arrange a match! Why doesn't he do it himself?"

"Oh, Grandpa!" Erofei Kuzmich said with a vexed frown. "How can he do it himself? The Lord bless you, what are you saying?"

"That's true," Grandpa agreed. "Your boy's a quiet fellow for these times. The kind that never make a fuss for nothing. As the saying goes, 'He who's strong never starts a fight.' A fine boy!"

But Erofei Kuzmich only waved his hand in disappointment.

"Well, speak up," he said to Andrei. "Whom should he go to?"

"Don't make people laugh," he replied, fussing noisily with his cartridges.

"Laughter isn't smoke; it won't sting your eyes! Speak up—well?"

"I won't say anything. . . ."

"Don't you be stubborn, Andrei!" threatened Grandpa Silanty, who had suddenly decided to try his hand at his forgotten vocation once again. "Or else I'll arrange a match with Fenya, the half-wit! Then you'll be sorry!"

Andrei himself had long been contemplating marriage. But only one girl appealed to him: Marika Logova. After that incident in the vegetable garden her face was always before his eyes, and his secret love for her caused him no little suffering. As yet, however, he was afraid even to think about marrying Marika.

"Dammit!" Andrei exclaimed when Grandpa Silanty suddenly decided to support his father. "First one of you acts silly and now it's both of you. Come, that's enough, that's enough!" Then he added unexpectedly: "I'll arrange the marriage myself."

"Yourself?" his father asked. "With whom?"

"I'll find somebody better than half-wit Fenya."

"Who, for instance?"

"Marika Logova."

Erofei Kuzmich stared distrustfully at his son for a few seconds. "What's the matter—have you gone crazy?" he asked irritably.

"Why?"

"You're a fool! A fool pure and simple!" Erofei Kuzmich stormed. "The best girl in the kolkhoz!

She has brains and looks and everything! And comes from a good family, besides. What's the use of talking? She's a first-rate girl."

"That's the kind I need."

"But will she ever marry you? Have you thought about that? Huh! Some idea! Look at him! As I live and breathe, he's gone crazy! Hasn't she made enough fun of you yet? Not enough yet?"

"No, she won't marry him," Grandpa Silanty confirmed.

Andrei was always tractable, but this time he stated firmly that he would marry Marika Logova and nobody else. He promised to speak to her as soon as possible. Swearing, Erofei Kuzmich agreed to postpone his plan.

That evening Andrei saw Marika on the village square. "Well, come what may," he thought, all afire. "Today I'll speak!" But Marika, noticing that he had taken a seat to the side, instantly shifted her black eyes and said something to her girl friends. Andrei realized that she was cooking up some mischief, grew confused and promptly rejected his bold idea.

The accordionist bent his projecting thatch of hair over his instrument and struck a loud chord for the singing; the flower-coloured bellows began to vibrate. Marika sprang forward and took up a pose with arms akimbo. While the accordionist fingered the white keys she cast a slow and sly look

about her. Then, with a shake of her braids that made the frills of her blouse flutter, she began to sing:

Ah, my heart, my heart unbridled,
Ah, beat softer, softer, heart!
For my laddie love is coming
And we never more shall part.

Sofia Veselova came up and stood on the other side of the accordionist. Placing her hand on her breast, she glanced at Marika and with mock anxiety chanted in a throaty voice:

The wind is gone, and yet the birch tree
Sings her song the whole day through.
Ah, my pretty, save thy trouble
He has not a thought for thee.

Andrei saw that the girls were going to make fun of him, and at the first opportunity he slipped away from the gathering.

"Well?" his father asked at the threshold.

"She said she'd think it over," Andrei replied gloomily.

Andrei hoped that his father, busy preparing the kolkhoz harness for the spring, would soon forget about the marriage. But Erofei Kuzmich had firmly resolved to see the matter through to the end. Almost every morning, if Andrei had been in the clubhouse or at a gathering on the village square the

evening before, he asked him how the courtship was coming along. At the end of a week Andrei could not think up any new excuses.

"She turned me down!" he declared. "Yesterday."

"What do you mean, turned you down?" Erofei Kuzmich stormed. That week he had frequently thought about Marika and, imperceptibly and involuntarily, had grown accustomed to the idea that she should and would come into the house as his daughter-in-law.

"Just that. She turned me down...."

"You poor child!"

When Erofei Kuzmich ran into Marika in the kolkhoz yard late the same afternoon he could not hold himself back. "So we're not good enough for you?" he cried heatedly. "Then who do you need? One of the district chiefs, eh? With a brief case? No, my girl, see you don't make a mistake! We're not just ordinary people, either, I'll tell you that! They've written about him in the newspaper. A fine swelled head you have!"

Marika was dumbfounded.

"Erofei Kuzmich!" she exclaimed. "What's the matter with you? What are you talking about?"

"As if you don't know! After a whole week of talking! But I'll just tell you straight to your face: if you go for a fellow with a brief case you'll be

sorry the rest of your days! That's how it'll turn out, mark my words! Some conceit!"

Immediately after her talk with Erofei Kuzmich, Marika stepped into the clubhouse as though by chance. Andrei was repairing the stage. When he saw her he almost dropped his plane; he felt with all his being that one of the most important events in his life was now about to take place.

A few minutes later they were sitting on a stack of fresh-sawn planks that smelled of resin, and Andrei, holding Marika's hand, was saying:

"Well, once you're willing, I'll be faithful to you to the grave." He shook his head, as though his happiness were more than he could bear, and Marika was surprised to see tears glisten in his eyes. "My whole life will be with you alone. . . ."

The marriage took place soon after.

V

Marika bustled about the house gaily, without concealing her happiness. The joy of seeing Andrei again had temporarily allayed all her fears. She was always like that: when she rejoiced she did it so wholeheartedly that everybody envied her, and when she grieved, everybody was afraid for her. The minute she saw Andrei she felt keenly how

wonderful it was to be by his side. Now she realized more clearly than before how she had missed him, and how her heart had been bleak and empty all summer without him, like an abandoned bird's nest.

As the guest of honour, Loznevoi was served in the best room. The others ate their supper in the kitchen. Marika had to get up several times to serve the battalion commander. This irritated her. She did not want to be away from Andrei one second, not a single second! With him she was so happy that she did not think about anything—not even about the fact that the next morning her happiness would come to an end.

After supper Marika called Andrei over to one side. "Why did you bring him along?" she asked, nodding toward the door of the best room.

"The battalion commander? Why?"

"I don't like him."

"Why, he's a good commander!"

"A good one he is! He looks at me like a cat at cream," Marika said angrily. "Oh, those men! I'd scratch all their eyes out!" And to stress her distaste for the topic she abruptly changed it. "Shall I heat the bath for you?"

Andrei's face lit up. "Yes, that would be fine!"

"I'll do it right away."

Marika started for the passageway but she stopped on the threshold and beckoned Andrei to her.

"Will you come and help?" she whispered, lifting her hand to his chest. "Do come!"

The steam bath stood beyond the vegetable patch, in a gully overgrown with hazel bushes, buckthorns and a small grove of young birches. In this sheltered place the leaves, hiding from the autumn, were still green.

Dusk was falling. The dark-purple western sky was streaked with spiralling black columns of smoke. The distant woods, like ancient fortresses with thousands of unlighted towers and cupolas giving off a dull golden glint, were being engulfed by the twilight. But in Olkhovka, on the hill, it was still quite clear; everything—the birches, the bushes on the slopes, the housetops, the windowpanes—was bathed in the purple afterglow. And in the light sky a big brass moon hung idly; looking at it, one wanted to take a stick and tap it to see how it rang.

Marika kept Andrei by her side all the while she prepared the bath. Here too she did everything with more bustle than usual, with a sort of nervous energy. And she talked rapidly, too, now asking Andrei about army life, now telling him how she had missed him, now passing on the village news. When the wood under the stone slab began to crackle, she nestled up against Andrei. "It's like that in my heart too," she said. "It's burning nice, with a crackle.... Are you listening to me? I suppose

some people never get as much happiness in all their lives as I have now. And how do you feel inside?"

"Inside—" Andrei paused. "First it's bright and then it's like here in the bathhouse—sort of hazy."

"Hazy? Aren't you glad?"

Andrei saw how happy she was and did not want to remind her that his untimely arrival was no great joy.

"Because of father?"

"Yes."

"Oh, botheration! Don't think about him, Andrei dear. I don't want you to think about that now. . . ."

Andrei sighed. "Can't help it. What will happen to you all if you remain here? He's lived his life already—but you? It's awful to think about it. Look—has your mother left?"

"Not yet. She's leaving tonight."

"Well, you go with her!"

Again Marika pressed up to Andrei. "No, darling," she said softly. "That wouldn't be right. Once I've come to live with your family I have to stay with them. That's the way it has to be. If they stay I'll have to stay too. No, no, that's impossible!"

She stirred the blazing logs with a stick.

"Well, they're burning fine. Let's go for water."

"Make sure you're not sorry afterwards!"

"Don't worry, I won't be. Let's go"

At the spring she gathered up her skirt and sat down.

"Do you know why I love you?" she said, taking Andrei's hand.

Andrei grinned. "Who can tell?"

"You're just like this spring," Marika said, pressing his hand firmly to her breast. "All of you! All of you! Well, what are you grinning about? Your eyes are like it: they're quiet and seem dark, but they're light inside, and you can see everything in them.... What are you laughing for? And no matter how much water you take from the spring it's always there. It's eternal. And I think you're like that too."

Andrei stroked her hair.

"Not all springs are eternal, Marika. A spring can gush out and gush out, and then all of a sudden it's gone! All of a sudden just vanished!"

"That's not true!" Marika rejoined spiritedly. "If it disappears in one place it'll gush out in another. It'll be in a different place, but still it'll live on. Don't argue, they're eternal. And you're the same.... Let's carry the water."

Andrei reached for the pails. "Let me take them."

"No, Andrei, together. On this stick."

When she had filled the tank Marika looked around, rubbing her smoke-stung eyes. "Now I'll have to sweep the floor. It's all littered up. I'll go

and pick twigs for a broom. No, no," she caught herself instantly. "Let's go together!"

They went into the birch grove. Andrei chose his twigs unhurriedly and broke them off neatly so as not to injure the tree and at the same time get twigs of the same size, but Marika snatched at random, stripping the shrivelled leaves in her haste.

"Don't rush," Andrei said with a grin. "Rush-body."

Marika straightened up and stood in front of him, a bunch of twigs in her lowered hand. She glanced at Andrei and then lifted up her face. In the late afternoon glow her eyes were unusually bright, and her lips were slightly parted, as if she were panting.

"Andrei!" she called softly, as though something had frightened her. "My darling!" she said a bit louder, and suddenly dropping the twigs she flung herself on his chest, pressed up close and began to whisper, oblivious of her words....

"But people will see us," Andrei said, all afire.

... She raised herself erect and for a minute sat composed, her eyes fixed on the darkened hazel bushes on the other side of the gully. Then, in a strange, distant voice, she said, "I'll wither away without you, Andrei." She felt about on the ground. "Like this twig. We broke it off—and its whole life is finished. Right away it'll start to wither."

Andrei opened his tobacco pouch in silence. Then he pressed Marika close with his big arm.

"Don't be sad, my little swallow. You said I was eternal. You did, didn't you? Well, I'll come back."

"But when?"

"Who knows?"

"Listen," she said in the tone she used when she was in earnest. "If you don't come back soon I'll run away! Do you hear?"

"Where to?" Andrei asked with a wry smile.

"To the end of the earth!"

VI

This marked the end of Marika's happiness.

They lay down to sleep in the best room. Marika was ready to talk the whole night long. But after the difficult march and the hot bath Andrei quickly fell asleep and began to snore loudly and laboriously. This was the first time Marika had ever heard him snore. She tried to turn him over on his side but could not: he was as heavy as the big stone step in front of the porch. And then Marika realized that the war had already begun to undermine Andrei's strength. What would he be like when he returned home from the war? A cripple, perhaps? Already changes in him were noticeable. In three months! And what if he had to fight a very long

time? He would become an entirely different person. Tomorrow he would leave, and never, never again would she see him as he had been and still was, the Andrei she had fallen in love with and still loved. And what if he didn't come back at all? A shiver passed down her spine. "My darling!" she almost screamed. "My life's blood! I can't live without you! Do you hear? I can't live!" she raised her hand to his close-cropped head. She had always liked to play with his soft wavy hair. Now, when she felt the prickly stubble on Andrei's head she reflected once again that the war had already taken away from him something she had loved, and that the next day it would carry him away from the house forever and engulf him in its bottomless maw....

A wave of horror swept over Marika. She felt she would not be able to keep from crying out so loudly that the whole house would hear. Cautiously she climbed out of bed and, on tiptoe lest she waken the guests or the family, went out on the porch.

The entire western section of the sky was lit up by the shimmering ruddy glow of fires hidden from view by the forest. The acrid smell of smoke was distinct in the moving air. But the eastern half of the sky was fully under the sway of the dark October night. In these nocturnal expanses shone all the stars frightened away from their accustomed places

in the west. From the nearby thickets rose a dank chill: the autumn rainy season was approaching.

Marika stepped on a birch leaf, and it occurred to her that now Andrei and that leaf were alike: the wind would swirl them up and carry them far, far away from home.

She did not hear the door creak behind her as Erofei Kuzmich came out. He had awakened when she went out, and realizing that she was sick at heart, waited for a while for her to return and then went out on the porch too. At sight of the figure in white he said in an alarmed voice, pretending he did not know it was she: "Who's that here?"

Marika did not answer.

"Is that you, Marika? Eh? What are you doing here? Watch out you don't catch cold."

"Go away, Pa."

"Now, don't be modest! This is no time for modesty. I have to talk something over with you. It's urgent."

Marika was silent. Erofei Kuzmich leaned back against the door jamb and continued:

"I've talked to him about it already, out in the vegetable garden.... Where can we go? All you do is yell that we have to leave, leave! But where to? Just wander anywhere? I know how much sense there is to that. The world's big, but it hasn't got many cosy corners. And besides, if we leave behind everything we've got it'll be stolen: people

are always ready to grab what belongs to somebody else. And what you take along you'll lose on the way, and then you'll come back with nothing to your name! No, there's nowhere for us to pick up and go. We've got to use our heads. You too. The Lord is merciful, and nothing will happen to us here. Do you think, say, that they'll touch peaceful folk? Let the army do the fighting—it's none of our business. It's always been that way!"

Erofei Kuzmich glanced sidewise at the western sky—it was an ominous purple, with a greenish tinge higher up—and listened to the murmur of the birch leaves. An autumn sadness pervaded his heart. He sighed, sat down beside Marika, and continued worriedly:

"So that's the way it's all turned out, eh? I just can't figure it out! Looks like our army's retreating all along the front.... And fast, too, eh? Now where, I ask you, could we go? Before you know it they'd be way ahead of you, with those tanks of theirs! It'd just be misery, and nothing else. Yes, they're retreating too fast! You can't even tell now which way this war will go."

"It'll go back where it came from," Marika said, moving away from her father-in-law.

"Of course, it should...." Erofei Kuzmich muttered. He covered his mouth with his hand and gave an embarrassed cough. "Only you see what's going on now? A regular mess. The Germans won't

get the best of us—that goes without saying—but they can move far in, oh so far! The Germans, they've always been greedy for foreign land. Yes, in times like these anything can happen. I had a talk today with that officer who's staying with us, and I looked at our soldiers—and after that my heart somehow began to feel uneasy! Inside me here there's something burning and burning all the time! I must have drunk three dippers of kvass—and still it just doesn't stop burning! And now I can't close my eyes. All I do is think about how I brought him up and thought we'd live fine, and now he'll go away—and that'll be the last of him! Ah, Andrei, Andrei! My father's heart tells me he won't come back, no! Does it take long to get killed in a mess like that? Have you thought about that, for instance, eh?"

Marika wheeled around abruptly. "So what?"

"How what? You ought to think about it. . . ."

Again he spoke on and on about Andrei, sighing heavily, and in the tangle of words only one thought drummed—strongly, persistently, like a pike thrashing in a seine—and that was that if Andrei left he would be killed for certain. Marika was upset even without listening to such talk. "Go away, Pa!" she said irritably. "What did you come out for? To frighten me?"

"I'm not trying to frighten you. I'm telling you to think."

"But what can I think up? A charm to protect him against bullets?"

"What's needed here is not a charm," Erofei Kuzmich, barely managing to keep his voice down, said in annoyance. "You have to use your head. It's not convenient for me to talk to him now. When I saw him today I had a bit of a talk with him—and I couldn't believe my eyes and ears, that's the truth! It's like they exchanged him for someone else in the fighting. He used to be such a quiet, reasonable fellow, and now I see I can't even speak to him about anything serious—he wouldn't listen to me anyway. Yes, nowadays things have come to a pass when sons listen less to their fathers than to their women. Naturally, a woman is a night bird. Nobody can outcall her. Now you—why don't you talk to him, eh?"

"Whatever about?"

"Come, you know yourself."

Marika jumped to her feet. "What do you want?" she asked angrily. "Well, what should I say to him?"

"Damn it, there's a breed for you!" Erofei Kuzmich muttered. "You can't say a single word.... Well, I can see how much you love him! So that's what love is like nowadays!"

"You leave our love alone!" Marika shouted with a toss of her head. "Do you hear? You better stop before I do something! You're not the one to

judge about our love, so there!" She pushed the door open and ran into the dark entranceway.

"Oh you devil's spawn!" Erofei Kuzmich whispered, amazed at his daughter-in-law's boldness. "Oh, what women are like nowadays, eh?"

VII

Dawn brought a world submerged in fog. On all sides of the Olkhovka hilltop dirty grey waves rolled gently and noiselessly. Here and there above the boundless sea of fog the tops of mounds were faintly outlined in the rosy light of dawn; on them, like abandoned lighthouses, stood jagged black firs. Only on the big Olkhovka hill was it lighter. Like a ship the village sailed slowly over the fog to meet the dawn, and the birches swished softly above it like golden sails.

The first to rise in the Lopukhov household was Alevtina Vassilievna. She was followed by Marika, pale after an almost sleepless night. They busied themselves about the stove, striving to do everything quietly. They got along well together, and their common concern for Andrei lent particular warmth to their friendship. Accustomed though Alevtina Vassilievna was to Erofei Kuzmich's iron rule, she found it taxing, and, by nature a gentle and kindhearted woman, she took respite from it in her friendship with her only daughter-in-law.

Now, as they prepared food for Andrei to take with him, Alevtina Vassilievna and Marika carried on a whispered conversation in snatches in the scullery.

Alevtina Vassilievna finished kneading pie dough and then, hearing Erofei Kuzmich snoring, openly brushed the tears from her plump perspiring cheeks and asked:

"Did he say if they're going far?"

"How can he know, Mama?" A bitter smile flitted across Marika's dry lips. "Well, I guess no farther than Moscow. I don't think a war was ever fought past Moscow."

"And then? They'll come back?"

"How else, Mama?"

"Oh Lord! Why, Andrei will ruin his feet!"

"I packed an extra pair of foot cloths for him."

"What about socks? Make sure you put socks in too," Alevtina Vassilievna ordered. "Wait, daughter. He didn't say why they're retreating, did he now? Or can those Germans be stronger, or, say, smarter than our soldiers?"

"I don't know, Mama. I've never seen them."

"No!" Alevtina Vassilievna exclaimed with sudden firmness; she even squared her shoulders. "May God strike me down, but I won't believe that anybody can get the better of a Russian! They'll pick out a place that's better, more convenient, and come to grips—and there they'll meet their grave, those

enemies of ours! If I'm wrong, daughter, then you can spit in my face! And when Andryusha comes back.... Lord, daughter, what about a scarf? Did you put one in? Winter will be here soon."

"Oh, Mama, it'll be heavy for him," Marika protested. "If there's a battle he'll have to run!"

"But why should he run? He can put his things down and fight!"

Out in the yard Blackie began to bark furiously. Some army men had come to see Loznevoi. They told the two women to wake him, and then they asked him to step outside.

Loznevoi's face wore a sleepy, dejected expression. Throwing his greatcoat over his shoulders, he walked out on the porch, rubbing the rumpled strands of colourless hair hanging down over his forehead. A faint tremour of alarm plucked at his heart. Waiting for him on the steps was the battalion chief of staff, Lieutenant Khmelko, a young man with a gentle, almost boyish face. Loznevoi glanced up at the east, where the dawn was spreading beyond the fog.

"What's happened?" he asked anxiously.

Near the barn Blackie growled. "Shut up, you brute!" Khmelko's orderly, who was standing off to the side, threatened in a bass voice.

"I did not want to go inside the house—" Khmelko began.

"Well, what's happened?"

"Here is an order," Khmelko said hastily. "Immediate withdrawal."

Loznevoi took the paper. "When?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Where's regiment headquarters? In the old place?"

"It has left already. Moving farther ahead."

Loznevoi hastily folded the order and thrust it into the pocket of his breeches. Controlling his agitation, he took a breath and said in a muffled voice:

"Well, Khmelko, get busy!"

"Yes, Comrade Battalion Commander!"

"We'll feed the men on the road?"

"Yes. The kitchens are smoking away."

Lieutenant Khmelko was free to go, but with a quick glance at his orderly he stepped closer to Loznevoi.

"The Germans are near," he breathed into his ear.

"Rumours?"

"Fact," Khmelko replied. "During the night refugees drove by. They were going like mad. Well, they said the Germans have broken through on the highways. Motorized—there's a steady roar in the air. If we don't watch out we'll find ourselves in a mousetrap. The men have learned about it. They're worried, and not sleeping but wandering around the village."

Loznevoi paused a second. "And you're supposed to fight!" he said coldly.

"With men like that it's not a war but only trouble!" Khmelko agreed.

"Well, that's all, Khmelko. Get busy!"

Loznevoi re-entered the house. In the middle of the kitchen he stopped. While he was talking to Khmelko the rest of the household had risen. Erofei Kuzmich was sitting at the table scratching his flabby white chest, a thoughtful expression on his face. Andrei was bent over near the door; his broad shoulders were moving as he pulled on his shoes. Kostya was already dressed, but he was sleepily rubbing his small eyes and squinting into the fire. The two women were whispering in the scullery. Loznevoi saw at a glance that they were all alarmed by the fact that he had been awakened at such an early hour, and called out of the house besides.

"Still asleep?" Loznevoi asked Kostya.

The orderly promptly sprang to his feet.

"I've finished, Comrade Battalion Commander."

"Get ready, we're leaving."

Loznevoi walked into the best room. A minute later he appeared in the doorway minus his greatcoat and with his belt in his hand.

"Are the horses fed?" he asked.

"The horses are all right," the orderly replied.

"Why so early?" Erofei Kuzmich asked.

"It's the army, father!" His eyes flashing, Loznevoi pulled his belt tight with one quick jerk. "The army."

"So you're going farther?"

"Orders, father."

"What about breakfast?"

"I'll see the men off and then step in."

Andrei straightened up. By the faint light near the door he seemed more tanned and husky than usual in his loose undershirt tucked inside his trousers. He was refreshed after his bath and a good night's sleep, but his eyes were pensive and gloomy.

"Must I go right now, Comrade Battalion Commander?" he asked.

"Yes, the men will be wakened now," Loznevoi answered. "You've had a stroke of luck, Lopukhov," he remarked, walking up to the door. "You're a lucky fellow!"

"How have I been lucky, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?"

"Why, you've been home!"

"That's not luck!" Andrei replied bitterly, raising his voice. "My heart is all on fire from that kind of luck—as though someone whipped it with nettles. Do you think it's easy to retreat through your own yard?"

"But still you've seen your folks. . . ."

"Yesterday I was drunk," Andrei replied, in a quieter voice. "And now it's the morning after.

Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't found them here and hadn't seen them."

For a few minutes after Loznevoi and Kostya left a heavy silence reigned in the kitchen. They all had known that Andrei was to leave in the morning, but still his departure was unexpected. Erofei Kuzmich sat with his left arm on the table, his clenched hand hanging limply over the edge. Alevtina Vassilievna and Marika stood pressed close to each other in a dark corner of the scullery, which was faintly lit up by the fire in the stove. From time to time they all cast silent glances at Andrei, who had begun to pack his modest soldier's belongings. Finally, with a strained feeling in his chest, Erofei Kuzmich said:

"Getting ready?"

"I have to go, Pa," Andrei replied with restraint.

"Well, take care, Andrei! Take care, my son!"

"Everything will be all right, Pa. . . ."

"See you use your head in battle!"

The sounds of snuffling came from the scullery.

"Now there, you two!" Erofei Kuzmich roared at the women, although his ear had caught only his wife's crying. "You're bawling! Sniveling! There's nothing to cry about! What is he—a child? He's got a head of his own on his shoulders. He's smart."

Andrei looked up from his knapsack. "No, Pa, I haven't got smart yet," he said in a voice unexpectedly harsh. "I'm just beginning to. And you, Pa, you're staying here—watch out you don't get too smart."

Erofei Kuzmich was taken aback. "Say, wait—what do you mean?"

"If you do," Andrei said, "it'll be too late. And in times like this it's easy to get too smart."

Erofei Kuzmich stood up and pressed his broad beard to his chest. "Aha, so that's it! Well, now I see that you've grown up! Well, go!"

How Andrei had wanted to sit peacefully with his family that morning! But peace in the household had been violated. A heavy, uncomfortable atmosphere had settled over the Lopukhov house. "It's as though it were full of fumes here," Andrei thought. "It just weighs on my heart!" Throwing his greatcoat over his shoulders, he went out into the yard with a heavy feeling. This was the first time he had spoken so harshly to his father, and he felt bad because it had happened against his will and, as though to spite him, in the hour of parting.

Out in the yard his beloved birches were already rustling, and their leaves were dropping to the ground. Under the shed a rooster flapped his wings and crowed. At sight of his young master Blackie rose from the barn entrance, stretched himself and yawned loudly with a click of his teeth. A sparrow

flitted out from under the shed and chirped a signal to its companions. Everything in the yard was just as it had been from childhood.

Andrei wanted to be alone. He fondled Blackie and then walked the length of the yard, treading softly on the cold earth. The vegetable garden gate was damp from hoarfrost. He opened it, walked around the shed, leaned against the wall and put his burning cheek to it.

Three months earlier Andrei had experienced for the first time the sadness of parting with his home and his family. But then he had gone to the west, to meet the war, leaving his near ones in safety far behind. Now he was going east, leaving them at the mercy of the enemy. What would happen to the family? What would happen to Marika? At the thought of leaving home for the second time a wave of pain and dread swept over Andrei....

VIII

Again Andrei marched east....

With a chill blast during the night autumn had nipped all the remaining vegetation in the fields, robbing them of their last summer colours. Everything all around was dead and forlorn. But once Andrei caught a flash of red among the scanty weeds on a hillside; it was a fox scurrying away from the road. Against the grey deserted fields the

groves were vivid splashes of scarlet. At sunrise the wind rose. Again the falling leaves began to rustle. The wind swept them eastward in clouds. And again Andrei experienced with a bitter stab the heavy feeling of losing everything that was so near and dear to him.

Marika accompanied him a long way out of the village.

Falling behind the battalion, they walked alone together. They did not want to speak about parting; indeed, they were afraid even to mention it. They walked along in silence. Only every once in a while, to tear themselves away from their thoughts, did they exchange a few words; words which at a time like that were empty and unnecessary. Blackie trotted at their heels.

They stopped beside the little bridge over the stream, beyond which stood a dense grove of young birches. Andrei took Marika's hands in his. Her face was calm and set as it had been all morning. but now a flush had come out on her cheeks. She stared fixedly at Andrei; in her dark eyes there flickered reflections of the sun, the sky and the scarlet leaves flying past. When she had looked her fill she lowered her gaze.

"Well, that's all, Andrei darling, that's all," she said softly and simply.

Swiftly Andrei drew her to him.

"Marika, my swallow!"

"Now go!" she said, her lips barely moving. "My little bird!"

"And remember—I'll be waiting!" she suddenly said in a louder voice, and, unable to fight down her grief, quickly pressed up close to her husband's breast.

Andrei felt one of her tears drop on his hand—and a gust of hot wind hit him in the face. He tipped his head back, as if to protect his eyes from that scorching wind, and realized with horror that he could not breathe. Pressing Marika to his breast, he pulled himself together.

"I'll return!" he said solemnly. "Do you hear?"

But the unbearably torrid wind continued to burn his face and eyes. Andrei could stand it no longer. He gently pushed Marika away from him, and for the first time she saw how madly he loved her and how painful it was for him to leave her. Now he was looking not at her but at the west, out of which the storm of leaves was flying.

"I'll return!" he repeated, this time forcefully and passionately. "I'll return!"

Marika had never imagined that the gentle, good-natured Andrei could be so stern. She took a step forward.

"Andrei darling, go!" she said with a frightened cry through her tears.

And so, without regaining his composure, Andrei said goodbye to his wife and crossed the

bridge with a quick, jerky stride. Marika stood gazing after him motionless, unable to wave her hand in farewell....

Well within the grove on the other side of the stream he stopped to adjust his knapsack and heard a noise behind him. He turned around to see Blackie loping along, his pink tongue flashing.

"Where do you think you're going?" Andrei shouted at him.

Blackie ran up and began to fawn at Andrei's feet.

"Oh, you fool!" Andrei said in a softer tone. "I'm going far away! Far, far away! Understand? And I don't know when I'll come back. Understand? Go home!"

But Blackie would not go away. He frolicked around Andrei, looking up at him with affectionate, yearning eyes. Suddenly Andrei felt terrified at the thought that he was so casually leaving home—for a long time, perhaps even forever.

"Blackie," he whispered. "You go to Marika. Go! Ah, Blackie!" He suddenly dropped to his knees and hugged the dog, shouting at the top of his voice: "Blackie dear! Blackie!"

But a second later, remembering himself, he pushed the dog away.

"Off with you! Get going!"

Blackie gave his master a surprised, injured look.

Andrei clicked the bolt of his rifle. "Get going, you brute!"

Blackie slunk silently into the bushes. Without looking back, Andrei set out quickly eastward along the forest road....

IX

Loznevoi was seriously upset by the rumours that the Germans were advancing rapidly along the highways. Before, while with division headquarters, he had been always a good distance away from the battlefields. His first week in the battalion had also passed quietly: they had retreated along deserted country roads without even a glimpse of the enemy. But now danger was following on their heels. Now it was clear that that day or the next there would be a battle—Loznevoi's first. He wondered what fate had in store for him.

Scenting danger, that morning Loznevoi observed his men more attentively than usual as he stood on a mound, his hands folded behind his back, watching the battalion march out of Olkhovka. From under his visor his keen grey eyes vigilantly examined the rows of soldiers. He saw that the retreat, with its endless marches, sleepless nights and constant alarms and worries, had worn the men to the breaking point. Their uniforms were shabby and faded and reeked with sweat. They had grown thin,

their faces were weatherbeaten and peeling, and their eyes bloodshot and puffy from lack of sleep. They looked about with a sullen, uneasy stare. As they marched down the hillside they broke ranks, stretching out into a single file. "It's not a battalion but a funeral procession!" Loznevoi reflected. He heaved a sigh and set out for the Lopukhov house.

Kostya was saddling the horses. Loznevoi heard Erofei Kuzmich talking in a loud, angry voice in the house. He paused near the steps and threw his orderly an inquiring glance.

"He's in a rage," Kostya said in a mocking tone. "Showing the lady of the house his temper."

At the sound of footsteps on the porch Erofei Kuzmich quieted down. When Loznevoi and Kostya entered the house he was pacing the best room, his boots squeaking. Erofei Kuzmich's face was dark and his beard was disordered. Alevtina Vassilievna lay on the bed with her arms spread out helplessly. By her side, bristling, sat Vasyatka. He was smoothing her thin, uncombed hair. Erofei Kuzmich seated the guests at the table and then said with a nod toward the bed:

"Look—she saw him off and now she's taken to her bed. That's what it is to see a son off! It's like tearing a chunk out of your heart!"

He went into the kitchen and looked into the

stove. "It's in the roasting pot," his wife said in a faint voice without moving.

"I know. Lie still."

He brought in a pot of mutton and began to set the table. Loznevoi glanced around the room.

"Why are you serving?" he asked. "What about your daughter-in-law?"

"She went to see him off."

"Didn't notice them."

"They went by themselves. Down past the village."

"Yes, she loves him," Loznevoi said, his mind on Marika.

"Who can tell?" Erofei Kuzmich responded evasively as he pressed a loaf of bread to his broad chest and cut off thick slices. "I can't understand the women nowadays. One minute they love you, but just move out of sight and they stop. Not women but windmills!"

Alevtina Vassilievna moaned. "What's that you're saying? Don't talk like that!"

"That's enough! Smarter than everybody else! I've seen enough of you women! They gave you freedom and then you went and took advantage of it. You don't love a man—you throw dust in his eyes!"

Erofei Kuzmich took a partly filled half-litre bottle of vodka from the cupboard and poured it out into teacups, measuring by eye. Then he

moved one of the cups over to the corner for himself.

"That's all that's left," he said. "I wanted to treat my son but he wouldn't touch it: must be enough bitterness as it is."

Erofei Kuzmich drank his portion down, cleared his throat and wiped his moustache. "Wonder what it'll be like under the Germans. Just as bitter, or smoother?" he said, looking around innocently and lifting a piece of mutton out of the pot with his fork.

"Who knows?" Loznevoi muttered, draining his cup.

Kostya sputtered, turned his head away and coughed, and then joined in the conversation. "Most likely neither!"

"Why?"

"They won't give you any."

They ate in silence for a minute. And then, as if following up a conversation already started, Loznevoi asked: "So you've decided not to leave?" He looked at his host with narrowed eyes which, now that his face was uncovered and it was light in the room, had lost their sharp steely glint.

"Where to?" Erofei Kuzmich replied in a loud voice. "Look at my old woman! Around the house she still keeps going, but just take her a mile away and that'll be the end of her. How can she go? If anything happens on the way it'll be the end of

her—and of me too. Why, she's falling to pieces! And before—you could have made two out of her!"

"You're not afraid?"

"To stay here? Huh! We'll die anyway. Better here than on the road. It's easier to die at home."

Kostya was surprised that Loznevoi seemed in no hurry to leave and was so talkative with their host. After he had finished his breakfast Loznevoi walked up to the mirror.

"Oho!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it wouldn't hurt," Kostya agreed.

"Give me my razor."

As Loznevoi beat up a lather in a teacup with his shaving brush he again became the person Kostya was accustomed to seeing: gloomy, pondering over some thought of his own. Loznevoi examined himself in the mirror for a few seconds, feeling his chin.

"Start with my head," he ordered.

"That too?" Kostya asked in surprise.

"While we're at it." Loznevoi fingered the thin strands of ashen-brown hair over his forehead. "See those curls? And I have to be handsome."

Kostya's face lit up with a sly smile.

"Got your eye on somebody?"

"So it appears. Get started."

"You shouldn't," Erofei Kuzmich put in in an attempt to dissuade him. "No matter what hair is like, still it hides your nakedness. Your head

will be as naked, the Lord forgive me, as a knee.... What's there beautiful about a naked thing?"

"That's all right. Kostya, shave away!"

Loznevoi spent about an hour in the Lopukhov house. Then he stepped out on the porch and raised his binoculars to his eyes. After the shave his face was noticeably fresher, but it remained cold and set—the face of a man deep in thought. Even the abundant sunlight did not soften it. For a minute or so Loznevoi looked at the country road running east. The battalion had already disappeared from sight in the birch grove on the other side of the stream. All of a sudden he smiled; a barely perceptible smile, with the left cheek only.

"They gone far?" Kostya asked.

"My horse," Loznevoi said, quickly walking down the steps.

Before they reached the stream they met Marika returning home She was walking slowly, her head lowered. Blackie trailed after her dejectedly. The wind was tossing dry leaves under their feet. Nodding to Kostya to ride on Loznevoi stopped in the middle of the road.

Marika had recognized Loznevoi from afar but pretended she had not and stepped off the road. With a tug at the reins Loznevoi turned his horse sideways. He sat his saddle expertly, with his arms slightly akimbo and the skirts of his trench coat thrown out. He tipped up the visor of his coat,

and the instant the sun shone on his eyes they softened.

"Seen him off?"

Marika delayed her reply longer than was necessary. She stared at the battalion commander as though she still did not recognize him.

"What of it?" she said at last.

"And he went?"

Marika flushed. "How could he not go?" she said hostilely.

"He's a fine fellow, of course," Loznevoi said in a conciliatory tone. "Now we'll be friends. Maybe I'll make him my orderly. I can see he's a good soldier. Another man probably wouldn't have left"—he paused—"such a wife."

Marika threw Loznevoi an inimical glance and started to go around his horse, but again he blocked her way.

"One word!" he said quickly. "Wish me luck. The way you did your husband. I'm not superstitious, but I feel your word will mean a lot. . . ."

Marika caught a broad jagged maple leaf as it floated past. She held it in her palm a few seconds, examining the pattern of veins under the transparent scarlet surface. Then, not looking up at Loznevoi, she threw the leaf over her shoulder with a careless gesture and, just as carelessly, said:

"Well, good luck."

"And best wishes?"

"Yes."

"That's all," Loznevoi replied. "Thank you. Now I know that I'm carrying my luck right in my pocket."

With a nod to Marika, Loznevoi spurred his horse. On the other side of the stream he turned round, gazed after Marika, smiled with the left side of his face and then rode on....

X

After Olkhovka the way became still harder. The sun had just begun to warm the earth when a drone filled the air: big groups of Junkers were coming over from the west. At times it was difficult for the eye to pick them out in the dazzling vault of the autumn sky, but at the dreary, insistent whine of their motors the men's hearts contracted spasmodically. Then came the bombing. Again, as the previous day, the earth sighed heavily and shuddered, and here and there thick ragged columns of evil-smelling black smoke spurted up as though from the fiery bowels of the earth. The wind drove the smoke eastward along with the fallen leaves. Suddenly rapacious little Messerschmitts swooped down on the roads with a savage high-pitched whine, and people rushed to the sides in terror to escape the vicious birdlike chatter of dumdum bullets.

At noon Loznevoi's battalion halted in a small wood. Immediately after, the commander of the regiment, Major Voloshin, galloped up on a sweating bay stallion. The regiment commander was accompanied by his deputy, Captain Ozerov, and a group of tommy gunners, all of them tanned young fellows. Passing soldiers told the arrivals where Loznevoi was, and, stretching out in single file, they headed for the western fringe of the wood, their horses' hoofs crunching on the fallen branches and leaves.

Meanwhile Loznevoi lay in his light field tent, pitched under a young oak; the wind was fluttering the ragged foliage on the crooked branches of the tree. On this windy October day Loznevoi had become particularly uneasy. Hourly he expected something big and sudden to happen. And when Kostya rushed in to report that the commander of the regiment had arrived, Loznevoi realized that this something was maturing. He sprang to his feet and quickly stepped out of the tent.

Major Voloshin was a big man in his late forties with a beefy, coarsened body. During the past few years he had put on superfluous weight and become flabby. He had been in the army since the spring of 1918. As a machine gunner he had fought the Whiteguards on the Volga, had taken part in the liberation of Kazan and then had participated in the heroic march into the heart of Siberia against

Kolchak. For valorous action in those years he was twice decorated with the Order of the Red Banner. Soldier Voloshin, whom war had long since torn away from his tiny plot of land near Starodub, found army service greatly to his liking, and he decided to remain in the army for life. He had now been in command of a rifle regiment several years, and he was proud of his service. He was liked in the regiment for his frankness and his good nature. He was rarely angry. His superior officers respected him as a man endowed with a large store of peasant wisdom. First and foremost, however, everyone saw in him a celebrated hero of the Civil War.

Just a single glance at the regiment commander from a distance told Loznevoi that the latter was highly upset. "Things must be bad," Loznevoi reflected. "Quite bad!"

Major Voloshin jumped heavily to the ground and with an annoyed wave of his hand cut short Loznevoi's report. Puffing hard, he dropped the reins and walked wearily over to Loznevoi's tent, throwing open his trench coat. He wiped his sweating forehead under the rim of his helmet and his flabby grey cheeks.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "All broken up."

"This way, this way," Loznevoi invited.

Settling himself on a shell crate under the oak, Major Voloshin again wiped his forehead and tem-

ples with a handkerchief without removing his helmet.

"The devil knows what's going on!" he said with vexation. "I issue order after order—and all for nothing! What does it mean?"

For a minute he puffed greedily at his cigarette in silence. The sound of the wind filled the wood. The wind wafted over the voices of soldiers, the nickering of horses, the ring of an axe against a tree and the cries of magpies, who were everywhere heralding autumn. In the spacious pale blue sky invisible motors droned. Somewhere in the distance a bombing operation was being carried out: there was a muffled pounding inside the earth, like an irregular heart beat. Voloshin coughed and threw his cigarette away.

"Ozerov, come here!" he called out.

Captain Ozerov, the deputy regiment commander, smoothed his horse's mane, said something to the tommy gunners and walked up to the tent with firm, heavy steps. He was a big man too, with the plain, slightly pock-marked face of a Siberian. He was in an open padded jacket.

"Seen the commissar?" Voloshin asked him.

"No, Comrade Major, I haven't."

"Running around all the time!" Voloshin muttered. "Well, it's good I met you at least. I need you badly."

"Anything new?"

"Yes. Got a map?"

Captain Ozerov opened his map case. Taking the map, Major Voloshin motioned to his deputy and the battalion commander to sit down by his side. They quickly settled themselves, Ozerov on a box and Loznevoi on his saddle. Meanwhile the major put his glasses on his broad nose, which was pitted with blackheads. He glanced about.

Loznevoi understood. "Don't worry," he said. "There is no one around."

Major Voloshin studied the map intently for a long time through his glasses.

"Aha, here it is!" His pencil stopped on a little green spot. "We're here, right? How far is it to the Vazuza River?"

"About thirty kilometres," Ozerov replied.

"Yes, I guess so." Voloshin looked up from the map. "Well, the situation is as follows. As you see, two big roads converge toward the Vazuza bridge." He moved his hand in one direction and then in the other. "One is here and the other there. Two big columns of Germans are moving along these roads. They are hurrying to reach the bridge."

"Are they far away?" Loznevoi put in cautiously after a pause, without asking permission to speak.

"Who knows?" Voloshin said, rolling his eyes angrily. "Division headquarters sent a runner but

there is no definite information. Everything is in a muddle. The devil knows, maybe they are at the crossing already! It's very likely! If so, we are—" He fell silent, biting his fleshy lips. "Anything is possible now."

"It's not so easy!" Ozerov said.

"What's not easy?"

"To move across foreign territory."

"We've heard that before," Voloshin said with a frown. "But they are moving! And look at where they've got to! When you come to think of it, it's terrifying! They've got some kind of fiendish strength!"

"More arrogance, probably," Ozerov objected.

"What about strength?"

"They're strong, too, but it's more arrogance. A retreating force is very often apt to exaggerate the strength of the advancing force."

Voloshin frowned. "Where does that come from? Clausewitz? That's what you studied in the academy all the time, isn't it?"

"I think that myself, Comrade Major."

"Stop it! That's enough!" Voloshin's eyeglasses danced on his nose. "We've done some fighting too! . . ." He fell silent, his fleshy lips working angrily. "Now, our whole division is moving along country roads between these two highways, following other units, and by tonight it is to reach the Vazuza, ahead of the Germans. If it does,

that will be very good. But that is not all. The main task of our regiment is something quite different."

Again he looked about warily, although he knew there was not a soul in the bushes around the reddish young oak under which the tent stood. Then, in a very low, muffled voice, he announced:

"We won't reach the Vazuza—" He drew the pencil over the map with an unsteady hand. "Our regiment will stop here," he said. Then, noticing that his hand was shaking, he lifted it from the map. "There's a big bottleneck at the crossing. They say the place is packed with units and refugees. And it's a real hell! Now, our main task is to hold up the German columns until all the units, including two regiments of our division, are on the other side of the river. We can go only last. Do you understand our assignment?" He gazed sternly at Ozerov and Loznevoi. "We have to hold out to the end. To the last man. Die, but save the others. Clear?"

During his entire week in the battalion Loznevoi had been expecting sudden, grim events, but he had never expected that their regiment would be doomed to certain death to save other units. Horror overcame him; he felt an icy chill grip his chest, as though a fierce Siberian blast had pierced it.

"Yes, that is clear," he replied. He did not hear his own voice.

Captain Ozerov, however, remained silent a few more seconds, fingering the edge of his map case.

"Well, we'll hold out," he said at last. He clicked the snap of his map case and quickly looked up at Voloshin with eyes that for some reason had turned an intense blue. "And we'll justify the great trust placed in us. But why talk so much about death? Everybody knows it's the easiest thing to die, especially in a war. But we Bolsheviks like harder jobs."

Major Voloshin was bending over the map to show Loznevoi the line his battalion was to hold. At Ozerov's last words he jerked his head up.

"Phil-os-o-phy?" he ejected with a whistle.

At that moment the heart-chilling whine of a motor reached their ears. A greyish-yellow, wasp-winged German fighter was coming over low from the east.

"Down!" shouted Ozerov.

They all dropped to the ground. The plane skimmed over the wood, almost brushing the tree-tops with its wings. A few seconds later voices at the edge of the wood cried:

"It crashed! It crashed!"

A hubbub broke out. Shouting to one another, soldiers dashed out into the field from the edge of the wood. Shots rang out. One of the plane's wings jutted crookedly above the weeds on a nearby knoll, its frog-coloured greyish-yellow paint shining in the sun....

XI

Before long the captured German pilot, in a torn flying suit with a shiny snakelike zipper down the front, was led up to Loznevoi's tent. He was tall and as thin as a reed, but with an energetic face. Folding his hands behind his back, he stopped near the oak and looked around leisurely, even brazenly, lifting his disheveled blond forelock high. He seemed not the least embarrassed at having been taken prisoner. He held everyone he saw around the oak in such scorn that he had no fear of them.

This was the first time Major Voloshin was seeing the enemy face to face. He had read about the German campaigns in Europe and had been amazed by the speed with which they had smashed Poland, captured Norway, routed France and penetrated into North Africa and the Balkans. That was extraordinary. In previous wars no one had ever achieved such rapid successes. The lethal might of the German war machine staggered his imagination.

The German's brazenness and assurance distressed Voloshin. "So that's what they're like!" he thought, inspecting the German through his glasses. Suddenly he stepped forward, his corpulent body quivering, and said hoarsely:

"Well, you bastard? What are you looking like that for?"

The German lifted his head a bit higher. A scornful smile flitted across his lips. Voloshin tore his glasses from his nose and looked at the German with big owlish eyes turning bloodshot with rage.

"What's your name?" he shouted, furiously clenching his huge fists. "Talk, you bastard! Well?"

The German looked at the regiment commander even more brazenly.

"You won't talk, eh? You won't talk?"

Shaking his fists and advancing on the German, Major Voloshin tried for another minute or so to make him talk, but in reply to all his questions the latter only twisted his lips in a disdainful smile; a few times he gave a faint shake of his dishevelled forelock. He was not the least afraid. Sweat began to trickle down Voloshin's cheeks. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and turned away.

"What a bastard! Doesn't understand!"

"May I?" Ozerov asked.

Voloshin suddenly recollected. "Why, that's right!" he said. "You speak German, don't you? Well, have a try!"

The German had meanwhile pulled a shiny little harmonica out of his pocket. He ran it tentatively along his lips; soft, melodious notes came out. Disregarding the men around him, he began to examine and try the harmonica. Ozerov cast a glance

at the German and his face instantly darkened; now the pockmarks stood out distinctly. He took a step forward and shouted in a voice that made the air tremble:

"*Stillgestanden*!"

The German raised his eyes for a second and then resumed what he had been doing. At this Ozerov took another step forward and shot his fist out in a furious blow that caught the prisoner under the ribs. He flung up his arms with a groan and hit the ground beside a hazel bush; his harmonica flew still farther.

"*Aufstehen*!" Ozerov shouted.

The German sprang to attention beside the bush, his eyes round with fear.

"What a gawk!" a voice exclaimed from a clump of bushes not far away.

"Your name?" Ozerov suddenly asked in Russian.

"Kurt Krause," the German answered in a guttural voice.

"Aha, so you understand Russian," Ozerov remarked. "Do you see?" he said, addressing Major Voloshin—but it was clear he wanted the soldiers peering through the bushes to hear him too. "The Germans are used to being beaten. When you start to beat them their haughtiness and arrogance fall off like a shell and they become their real selves." Chopping the air with his arm, he repeated: "We

have to beat them! Beat them! Then they'll understand whom they are dealing with!"

Approving voices spoke up in the bushes:

"That's right!"

"Some punch!"

"Started talking, didn't he? And in Russian, too!"

"Of course, why fuss with him?"

Captain Ozerov stepped closer to the German. Afraid of another blow, he jerked his head still higher, and his eyelashes began to flutter.

"The present German army is invincible!" he parroted doggedly.

"You don't say!" Ozerov's face had brightened. Now it was he who was gazing scornfully at the German. "And may I ask why you are standing here?"

Kurt Krause lowered his head and did not reply.

"You were escorting the columns moving along the highways to the bridge," Ozerov said. "That we know. Perhaps you'll say it isn't true?"

"No, that is true."

"When are they to reach the bridge?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Don't lie!" Ozerov shouted.

Major Voloshin, who had been standing in the background quite a while, was in a hurry to give Loznevoi his final instructions and head for the Vazuza. He did not like the fact that Ozerov was

dragging out the interrogation. Moreover, he was displeased because Ozerov and not he had made the German answer. To enhance his prestige in the eyes of the men around him, he decided to finish the questioning himself.

"Tomorrow, you say?" he asked, stepping forward.

"Tomorrow morning," Krause repeated. "That is what I know."

"Well, that's all!" Voloshin commanded. "We're finished!"

Kurt Krause shuddered.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked quietly.

"Kill you? Why?" Ozerov said scornfully. "No, you will live. You will be given an opportunity to live to see the defeat of your Germany. You'll—"

"Ozerov, stop!" Voloshin shouted. "That's enough."

Then the major called over Loznevoi, who had been standing under the oak all the time, warily concealing his dully flickering eyes in the shadow of his visor.

"Where are they—those men of yours?" he asked.

"Here, Comrade Major!"

"Step forward!"

Out of the hazel bushes stepped a sergeant carrying a rifle, followed by four soldiers. The ser-

geant was a tall, swarthy man with a slight stoop; he was the silent woodsman type, the kind who seem born to stalk animals in the taiga or prospect for gold in desolate places. He was no more than twenty-five, but he appeared older: from a distance lines were visible on his forehead, and a dark stubby growth covered his lean, tanned cheeks. One could have guessed infallibly—sooner from his bearing and his self-possessed glance at the regiment commander than from his age—that he had been in the army a long time and had become fully accustomed to the rigours of a soldier's life.

"Your name?" Voloshin asked.

The sergeant waited a second, his bold brown eyes fixed on the commander, and then answered unhurriedly, without raising his voice:

"Yurgin, Comrade Major."

"A Siberian?"

"You guessed it. From the Yenisei."

"Did he shoot back?"

"Yes, a little," Yurgin replied unwillingly.

"Listen, my eagles!" Voloshin said, now addressing not Yurgin alone but all the men. "On behalf of the service, I thank you for your courage!" The soldiers replied to the commendation.

"And now take him away," Voloshin said. "Over there, a bit farther. And guard him. Clear?"

"Yes, Comrade Major!" Yurgin saluted unhurriedly.

Kurt Krause was led away.

"Send him to division headquarters," Voloshin ordered with a fleeting glance at his deputy.

After that the major remained in the wood only a short while. Smoothing out the rumpled map on the box, he finally showed Loznevoi where his battalion was to take up defence.

"Zhuravsky's and Bolotin's battalions," he explained, "will straddle the highways and hold back the German columns, while you will stand in the centre, between the highways, along these little heights and fringes of groves.... Your job, as you can see, is simpler."

Controlling his agitation, Loznevoi began to mark up his map. The map swam before his eyes: the signs, numbers, green spots and names of villages seemed to be crawling over it like living creatures eluding the poisonous blue of his pencil.

"Stop!" Voloshin exclaimed. "What are you marking?"

"Ah, this is it! Excuse me, Comrade Major."

"Yes, by the way," Voloshin said, "you haven't seen action yet, have you?"

"Not yet, Comrade Major."

"Well, that is why I am putting you in the centre. Those two battalions will fight on the highways, and you in the centre will have a simpler job—less dangerous. But, in general, you have to take up that line, dig in and stand firm! And no retreating

without orders. Unless ordered—not a step back!" The major's voice rang out firm. "Die, but do not budge. Fight to the last man!" He glanced sidewise at Ozerov and added, "And without any philosophy!"

After pointing out on the map the place where he intended to set up his command post, Major Voloshin quickly mounted his horse and galloped out of the wood with his tommy gunners.

This meeting with Major Voloshin was the most important event Loznevoi had experienced in recent days. When he had seen the regiment commander off, he called his chief of staff, Lieutenant Khmelko. The latter had long been awaiting this summons, impatient to learn the news. He quickly walked up to the battalion commander with his light boyish step, his spurs jangling, and raised his hand to his visor. Loznevoi was playing with a handful of bronze acorns.

"Do you know what we are?" he asked in a whisper without looking at Khmelko.

Khmelko leaned forward. "We? What?"

Loznevoi threw the acorns on the leaf-strewn ground. As he walked past Khmelko he said into his ear:

"A suicide battalion!"

And now, pondering once again over what awaited him the following day, Loznevoi definitely embraced an idea that was to prove fateful for him.

XII

Pushing aside the branch of a hazel bush, Captain Ozerov caught sight of Matvei Yurgin. The swarthy, taciturn sergeant was squatting on his heels by a leaf-strewn little pool surrounded by fir and birch stumps. He was cleaning his sooty messtin with a bunch of wet sedge.

"Ah, my fellow Siberian!" Ozerov called genially.

Yurgin put his messtin down, stood up and fixed his self-assured glance on the approaching captain.

"Are you from Siberia too, Comrade Captain?" he asked.

"Yes. Only I come from the Ob River area."

Yurgin smiled. "Oh, so we're neighbours!"

"Go on with what you were doing, don't stop," Ozerov said. He came up to the pool and squatted beside it. Yurgin sat down opposite him and took up his bunch of sedge.

"Away from home long?" the captain asked.

"Yes. I'm serving an extra period."

"Without a furlough?"

"No, I had one last year," he replied, using a Siberian word. Ozerov smiled when he heard the forgotten word; it carried with it a breath of his native Siberia. "Haven't got out of the habit of using our words yet?" he asked after a pause.

"I'm beginning to. But they stick like ticks."

Ozerov picked up a twig and drove a few leaves

away from the middle of the pool. In the open space green spikes of sedge sticking up from the bottom straightened out. Delicately-minted spangles of sunlight from the rays breaking through the leaves of a nearby birch fell on the smooth dark bottom of the pool.

"A Communist?"

"Yes. Since spring."

"What did you do in Siberia?"

"On a kolkhoz, of course—hunted in the taiga with a brigade."

"Squirrels?"

"Most of the time."

"There's lots of them in your Yenisei region."

"Millions of them! There's plenty of our own, and then those that come from other places in search of food. . . ."

They fell silent for a while. Yurgin diligently scoured the scorched bottom of the messtin with earth. The voices in the wood died down—the men were evidently resting after dinner. From both flanks the distant rumble of guns came over in waves. At times the earth gave a faint tremour, and the green prongs of sedge quivered over the pool. Ozerov's legs began to grow numb. He rose but immediately sat down on a fir stump.

"Well, neighbour, not fed up yet?" he asked.

"Not fed up with what?" Yurgin rejoined, on his guard.

"Retreating."

With chagrin Yurgin threw the crushed bunch of sedge into the pool. "More than fed up, Comrade Captain! Is this the way? It's breaking my heart!"

"Look, neighbour, now you tell me this—" Ozerov glanced behind him and then continued in a lower voice. "Why are the men so afraid of the Germans, eh? Why? What's the reason?"

"Who's afraid?"

"Lots of people are."

"No," Yurgin objected calmly. "Very few, Comrade Captain. Who are those Germans, anyway? A special breed? No, there's no particular fear of the Germans. If a man's rabbit-hearted, of course, he'll even be scared by his own shadow."

"Why does panic break out so easily?"

"That's because of the tanks and planes, Comrade Captain. The men aren't afraid of the Germans—that goes without saying—but they are a bit afraid of their tanks and planes, that's a fact. Many of them haven't seen a real battle yet, haven't been under fire yet, and those machines, they.... Their whine is enough to make you shiver, damn them! And we—may I say it?"

"Of course, speak up."

"Look at our rifles," Yurgin nodded toward his rifle, which was in a dry spot, leaning against a fir tree. "They're good rifles, of course—

what's the use of talking?—but not against that game. What sense is there to going after a bear with bird shot? And those bottles—may I?"

"Speak up, don't be afraid!"

"I'm not afraid." Yurgin smiled with his lips only. "My father trained me not to be afraid when I was a youngster. Once we tracked a she-bear.... Well, he shot her down quick near her den. I was so glad I jumped up and ran over, and just then another bear popped out of the cave! Showered me all over with snow it did! It turned out to be a year-old cub. I was frightened to death that time. Well, my father began to beat me then and there. He broke both skis on me. I just about managed to crawl back to the cabin."

"But the cub—did you get him?" Ozerov asked with lively interest.

"Never, Comrade Captain! While my father was giving it to me, he ran away, the son-of-a-gun!" Yurgin rinsed out the messtin and turned it upside down on a thin little birch stump to dry. "And that was the end of that!" he said with satisfaction, his voice gay for the first time since the beginning of the conversation. "Fear has to be knocked out of a man. If you don't knock it out in time, he's lost!"

"You mentioned the bottles," Ozerov reminded.

Finished with the messtin, Yurgin also sat down on a stump, facing Ozerov. He took a clean cloth

out of his pocket and began to wipe his roughened hands.

"Well, about the bottles," he continued in his leisurely fashion. "When the men start talking about the bottles, I praise them myself. You can set a tank on fire with them—what a flame they give! They make real heat. But just the same, those bottles are a poor man's weapon. They're not much help. Once I had to.... There it comes at you, making enough racket to knock you off your feet. And you—holding the little darling by the neck—you're just about ready to faint! What you need is thunder to stun it and lightning to burn it through and through, and you squirm there in your foxhole with that half-litre bottle and aim at its side to set it on fire! What kind of work is that, Comrade Captain?"

Ozerov listened, watching the leaves he had scattered float back toward the middle of the little pool. Then he lashed out at the water with his twig.

"Wait a while, neighbour! We'll have everything we need! We will!"

"I believe it!"

"Both tanks and planes! Everything! Only wait a while!"

"That's all right, we'll wait," Yurgin promised.

"And meanwhile you've got to knock them out with fire bottles!"

"Well, nothing for it! We will!" Yurgin paused, glanced at Ozerov and then continued more spiritedly: "Even with the weapons we have, Comrade Captain, we could fight better, but there's another catch. It's just beyond me! Look at how far we've retreated, how much land and property we've left behind, how much want we've suffered, and still there's lots of people who haven't got their dander up yet. Not yet! They're beginning to little by little, but that's all. I can see that. But when they get their dander up—then watch out! Then the Germans'll be afraid of even our bare hands! It's like in an apiary.... A bear sticks his paw into a hive, and the bees all rush out. And at first, before they can figure out what's happened—what a swarming and a buzzing there is! But when they see the bear is cleaning out the hive—then it starts! They fasten on to the bear, who makes off as fast as his legs will carry him! And how much strength in each little bee! And what courage! It'll die itself, but it stings away! I've seen it.... And here's what I think: when we reach that point—then watch out! I beg your pardon, Comrade Captain—maybe I don't see it right?"

Ozerov stood up.

"Well, neighbour, you've gladdened my heart," he said. "You figure correctly, quite correctly!" The captain lowered his eyes. "Hate is the strongest weapon. So far we haven't got enough of that ei-

ther. But that weapon, Yurgin, won't be shipped up to us from the rear. We have to forge it ourselves, as we go. Understand? You remember that."

"I understand," Yurgin said.

"And now, neighbour, take your rifle and let's go. Where's that German? We have to send him off. I'll call some men. Is he far away?"

"He's here nearby. Come on!"

...Kurt Krause was sitting in a clearing under a little linden with a dark bark. In front of him stood a new green messtin filled with a thick stew of meat noodles. All around sat soldiers, looking on with curiosity as the prisoner worked away with a spoon, making no effort to conceal his greediness. The majority were also seeing a live German so close—face to face—for the first time.

"Dammit!" Andrei exclaimed in a low husky voice. "You're starved, man! Go ahead, eat, eat! If it's not enough I'll bring some more. We're not stingy. Eat!"

"He certainly can eat!" a soldier by the name of Degtyarev remarked in wonder.

Although they knew that the prisoner understood Russian well—from behind the bushes many of them had heard the deputy regiment commander question him—the men nevertheless spoke about him as though he not only did not understand the language but was hard of hearing besides.

"He knows how to eat all right!" Umrikhin confirmed. "It's a wonder!"

"Our eaters couldn't stand up to him!"

"Nohow! That's the second portion without taking a breath!"

"And he's as thin as a rail."

"You know what they eat?" Glukhan said. "They say they eat a stew made out of sawdust. Is that true?"

"They just gobble it down," Umrikhin put in knowingly.

"I suppose that's why they attacked us."

"A queer people," Andrei remarked.

"More greedy than queer!"

"Say, fellows, does my foot itch!" Degtyarev said. "Oh, just for one good swing at his nose!"

Matvei Yurgin pushed through the bushes and strode into the clearing.

"'Ten-shun!" he snapped out without raising his voice.

Captain Ozerov followed the sergeant into the clearing. A minute later two tommy gunners led Krause away.

"Who brought that?" Ozerov asked, with a glance at the messtin under the linden.

Andrei straightened to attention in front of the commander. "I did, Comrade Captain!"

"Tell me—were you ordered to feed him?"

Andrei did not reply.

"Is he on the rations list already?"

"He asked for something to eat," Andrei replied, restraining a sigh.

"Ah, I see," Captain Ozerov said softly. "And so you felt sorry for him. You've got a kind heart, haven't you?" Ozerov raised his voice. "Why, of course!" he said mockingly. "He's tired! Since morning he was flying over the roads and killing our people!" Ozerov's face suddenly darkened, and again the pockmarks stood out sharply. "Why are you so kind to that murderer? Why?"

A flush rapidly spread over Andrei's cheeks. He looked straight at Captain Ozerov, but he was so upset he did not hear what the latter was saying. The captain moved closer and closer to Andrei, staring fixedly at him with eyes a blazing blue under scowling sun-bleached eyebrows.

XIII

On both sides of the dirt road small fresh bomb craters gaped on the bare, wind-swept hillock; around them scorched lumps of earth lay scattered over the dusty, trampled grass. It looked as though someone had tried to bore through the hillock with a huge drill in many places but had failed. By the roadside and among the bomb craters lay dead horses, the remains of peasant carts, and scraps of harness. The wind, which had dropped

a bit since noon, blew gently over this mournful spot.

"How he scattered them!" Andrei exclaimed, shaking his head.

"No, it was more than one," Matvei Yurgin said after looking around. "Look at what they did, damn their rotten souls! Blasted a whole group of carts—women, children and all—sky high!"

"I can't figure out what's going on!"

"Why not? Take a look!"

"What kind of war is this?"

"Yes, it doesn't look like war. It's plain murder!"

Their platoon was marching in the van of the drawn-out column, after the forward patrol. As they passed over the bare, crater-pitted hillock the men looked about them in silence. The road curved gently and began to dip toward a dark fir grove. And so their way led, from grove to grove; richly embroidered with an ingenious sylvan pattern is the Rzhev countryside. The sun was already past its zenith. Light-grey clouds driven to the horizon from afar by the wind rose steeply into the pale sky. After working hard since early morning the wind was completing its diurnal duties with no particular enthusiasm. Now the trees in the forest rustled not all together but in turn: after the leaves of a birch had fluttered a neighbouring linden swished, and then, when its turn came, an oak shook its reddish locks.

On either side of the road at the edge of the grove lay gravemounds of dark earth. Over them rose fresh, hastily-made crosses. One of the graves bore a miniature cross—it was only slightly higher than a nearby birch stump which had sent out young shoots that summer. These were the graves of the people who had met their death on the mound, Andrei realized. There was no one in the new and unplanned little graveyard but farther ahead women's kerchiefs were fluttering among the brownish-red bushes, and voices and the barking of a dog could be heard.

"Yes, they won't do any more traveling," Yurgin remarked glumly.

He turned to the soldiers and opened his mouth to shout something to them, but instead he clamped his lips tight and continued walking. The men cast dark glances at the graves. They marched past in silence, their messtins and helmets jangling. They walked as though they were returning from a funeral.

Inside the grove, behind a clump of buckthorn off the road, Andrei caught sight of a wagon in which a black lamb lay tangled in her rope. She was stretching out her neck to reach a branch with a few greenish-golden little leaves on it.

"They're ours!" Andrei exclaimed. "I'll run over!"

"What do you mean yours?" Yurgin asked.

"Our kolkhoz people, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Well, go and see them...."

The previous evening Andrei had looked on with bitterness and anguish as the Olkhovka kolkhoz people, frightened by the swift and sudden withdrawal of the army, fled from their native village. In the course of the evening he had managed to visit some of his neighbours who were preparing for their forced journey to the east. One of them had been Stepan Boyarkin, the chairman of the kolkhoz. He was to leave at the head of the last group. Among the various belongings in the back of Boyarkin's wagon had been a jolly-faced little black lamb.

Andrei ran around a buckthorn bush and came upon the wagon; its shafts were spread wide apart, and the saddle strap and reins lay on the grass. A bit farther away, on a rough carpet of bilberries in a little clearing, a sorrel horse lay on its side, its head awkwardly thrown back. Stepan Boyarkin, a tall, bony, clean-shaven man of about forty with a sickly-looking face, was sitting on his heels near the horse's head. At the sound of a stranger approaching the wagon he rose, and when he recognized Andrei he waved his hand despondently. "Well, that's the end of him!" he said.

Stepan Boyarkin was in an unbuttoned work jacket, and his fair head was uncovered. He had on only one boot; his left trouser leg had been slit

and rolled up over the knee, and his thin calf hastily bound with a strip of sacking, now bloodstained.

"Seen what they did to us?" the tall, bony, pale Boyarkin called out as he limped over to the wagon.

"Were they all from our village, Uncle Stepan?"

"No, from different places. Hardly any from Olkhovka. But there were some, just the same. . . ."

"When did it happen?"

"This morning."

Andrei was amazed at how Stepan Boyarkin had changed in a single day. He had long been suffering from a stomach ulcer, but now his pale cheeks were more sunken than ever, as though he had starved for days, his cheekbones and lips protruded, and his light hazel eyes looked out from their large shadowy hollows with such greedy intensity that they seemed to be trying to take in as much of the world as possible. The past twenty-four hours had exacted a heavy toll from Stepan Boyarkin. The day before he had been completely worn out by the arrangements for evacuating the kolkhoz members and the inevitable confusion it entailed, and by sundry other worries. He had been angry because the district centre had not issued timely instructions concerning evacuation, because he had been compelled to leave in a great hurry and had not managed to take care of certain necessary matters before departing from Olkhovka. It was with a

heavy heart that he had left his family behind in the village: his old mother-in-law, a paralytic invalid, was at death's door, and his wife had remained to lighten her last days. And now today there had been a new calamity and new worries.... But exhausted though Stepan Boyarkin was, his entire figure breathed a big, inspiring renewal: either during the past twenty-four hours he had learned something he had long been trying in vain to learn, or else he had achieved some joyful, invigorating and encouraging inner victory.

"You see, here's how it happened," he began, winding up the reins. "Even with all the running around yesterday I barely finished those jobs by nightfall. And how can you start out at night? We left at dawn. We reached this place, and here, the devil only knows why, we all came out on that open spot at one time. You see, everybody was rushing! And just when that pack of women reached the top of the hillock the planes came over. And in one second they swept it clean! Everybody who was able to rode away as fast as he could. Most of them scattered into the woods. Not a single chance, Andrei, more's the pity! Well, we reached this place.... My horse took his bit in his mouth and made it for here, and then his legs buckled under him, the poor creature. A bullet got him in the side. Now sit here and whistle! And just for spite a bullet nicked my leg. Now what good am I with

one leg? And it would be different, say, if they couldn't see what kind of column it was! They could see it was just women and children! Why, one of them flew over so low he almost ran into my shaft bow! What kind of business is that—fighting women and children?"

"Who was killed?" Andrei asked, all afire.

"All women. And one girl, too. She was from our village."

"Whose girl?"

"Ulyana Shutyaeva's."

"Little Valya? That little blonde girl?"

"That's the one."

"No, Uncle Stepan, no!"

"Yes. I picked up the pieces myself."

Andrei turned his face to the wagon. "Don't tell me any more, don't!"

"Well, today I fed one of them some of our earth, thank God!" Boyarkin said in a different, higher, voice. "Fed him till he was full! That one won't ever ask for more!"

"A German?"

"There he is, take a look."

He led Andrei some twenty paces from the wagon, through a clump of low bushes that were still somewhat green in the shade of the firs. Among the golden ferns in a hummocky, mossy hollow lay sprawled the lanky figure of a German in a flying suit with a shiny snakelike zipper down the front.

The German's mouth was open and stuffed with damp earth. Andrei instantly recognized the captured flyer whom he had treated to meat and noodles at noon. He recoiled.

"See? He's full up to his ears!" Boyarkin said in the same high-pitched voice. "If we fed them all like that they'd refuse our food soon enough! They'd lose the desire soon enough!"

"How did he get here?" Andrei asked, turning away.

"Two of your boys drove by with him a little while ago," Boyarkin replied. "Fine fellows! Well, when they saw me they stopped, and we got to talking. I told them everything. 'Where are you taking him?' I say. 'Going to pickle him? Let me test if his heart's fixed in strong.' Grand fellows they were. They had a smoke and then went their way. Well, let me tell you, he didn't turn out to be brave at all. Even filled his pants. Phew, let's go! He must have stuffed himself on something."

In the bushes Stepan Boyarkin caught Andrei by the sleeve, moved his gaunt face with its intense, burning eyes close to his, and said through his teeth, as though afraid the dead man behind them would hear, but with a violence he could barely restrain:

"And you know what? I killed a man—and I don't feel any horror! Understand? And I can look at my hands without horror. I killed a man—and now I feel all on fire inside!" He took a few

steps forward but wheeled sharply about to face Andrei again and continued in his normal, somewhat shrill voice: "I'm not going any farther! How can I on one leg? Besides, I guess there's no need to go. Do you have to hit them in the face absolutely? What about the back of the head? Why is that any worse? I'm going nowhere, Andrei! I'll get some men together—and we'll make it so hot for them here they'll yell holy murder! We'll make them cry, all right! They'll cry burning tears for ever having come here! They'll bathe in blood!"

Boyarkin said this with such force and fury that a flush spread over his cheeks and tears began to glisten in his hot, round eyes. At that moment it again occurred to Andrei that before him was an altogether different Stepan Boyarkin from the one he had known not only recently but even the day before. He was a completely renewed man, with a renewed face and a renewed heart....

XIV

"Here's where to dig," Yurgin said.

"The earth here is hard," Andrei remarked.

"So much the better. The earth is our protection."

Andrei looked up as he tugged his entrenching tool out of its case. Before him lay a strip of virgin meadow with a thick growth of grass. Clumps of frost-blackened thistle stood out against the reddish-

grey of the grass, and also a circle of trampled, withering scrub in which a handful of amber-coloured linden and birch leaves had been caught. Beyond the meadow a rolling field of fallow spread to the west; at the far end fir groves rose over the field like little islands; behind them, as always nowadays, big clouds of smoke darkened the sky.

Andrei tried the edge of the spade with his finger and glanced backward to the east. On a gradual rise scarred with gullies stood a golden grove of tiny birches which only that summer had outstripped the grass in height; beyond, a freshly-ploughed field lay black; then came strips of whitish stubble, and past the low hills a ridge of woods in autumn dress was pierced by the slanting rays of the sun. The day was fading in a calm. In the woods the fall of leaves was hushed.

That day Andrei had marched away from Olkhovka more depressed than when he had approached it the day before. Home and family and places beloved from childhood had been left behind. With all his soul he had come to experience the bitterness of losing what was part of him; and having experienced this he realized with especial clarity how bitter it was for the others who were now moving toward the east. Now he viewed the world through different eyes.

He looked about the spot where the battalion had halted, a spot filled with the rude and majestic

beauty of the North. And suddenly he realized that he could go no farther eastward—he simply could not! "How long can this retreat go on?" he thought wildly. "How far? Here's where to stop and make a stand!" He began to dig with a quick, sure swing.

At the beginning of the war Major Voloshin's regiment had been stationed at Opochka, on the Velikaya River, where it had taken on reinforcements from the reserves. From there it had begun its retreat. In the course of the retreat the regiment had halted several times to take up defence. But each time it had turned out the same way: they would dig in, stop for a day or a night, engage an enemy reconnaissance force in a small skirmish or perhaps not see the enemy at all, and then withdraw. Waves of gunfire constantly rolled past its flanks, and Voloshin's regiment, like the entire division, pressed eastward as though fearing the waves would break over it. Nonetheless, each time Andrei dug trenches eagerly and hopefully.

He did so now also. No sooner did the trench begin to take shape than Andrei again became filled with hope that the regiment would finally hold the Germans at this line. He worked earnestly, and his hope grew stronger as he worked. Occasionally he glanced around. The entire battalion was working rapidly and silently. It was spread out across fields of stubble and hillsides dotted with clumps of bushes. Behind the firing line the artillerymen

were fixing up gun positions in two places. The clang of iron against stone sounded everywhere. From the groves came the ring of axes. From the trenches and slits, as from ventilators, drifted the chill odour of deep-turned earth.

"How numerous we are!" Andrei thought."Can it be that we'll retreat again?" This time his desire not to retreat any farther was especially strong, and his hopes that the regiment would finally stop the Germans soared higher than ever before.

He was the first of the company to dig himself in up to his chest. He finished off his trench painstakingly. In front of it he threw up a steep breastwork which he camouflaged with birch branches, and on the bottom he spread dry grass. When again he dropped his spade to turn and look to the west for a moment, the sky was crimson with the sunset and smoky from huge fires.

"All finished?" Yurgin called to him from the side.

"Done!"

Matvei Yurgin was only a young noncom, but in his five years in the army he had come to a clear understanding of what the fighting man should be like. He had long since adjusted himself to the idea that if he had to serve, then he must serve well. Always and in every way he strove to be an example to his men, showing them how to bear the rigorous army duties. He never had to force himself to be

exemplary in every way; it came to him naturally. Ordinarily Matvei Yurgin was unhurried, morose and severe; he never held himself aloof, however. He was one of those officers who are not very popular among the men in time of peace but are dearly loved in battle. During the brief engagements with the Germans in the course of the retreat all the men in the company came to know that on the battlefield the composed Sergeant Yurgin burned with an indomitable fire that drove him to fight with wild and fearless fury.

From the very first the stern and morose sergeant was drawn to Andrei. He himself probably could not have explained why. He always kept an especially friendly eye on Andrei. Andrei had not served in the army before and did not know much about warfare, but watching him Yurgin saw better than the others that with time the thoughtful, good-natured fellow might unleash his potential strength like a real soldier. Perhaps this was what most drew him to Andrei.

Yurgin wiped his spade on the grass and went over to Andrei.

"You beat me this time."

The sergeant took in the foxhole at a glance. "Oh, you've fixed it up fine!"

The thickset Semyon Degtyarev approached them silently from the other side. Degtyarev was a seasoned soldier whose regular term would have ex-

pired that year. Life in the army had moulded him well; it had given him stamina and taught him always to be cheerful and gay. He was resolute and bold, and like all short men, constantly strove to stand out. He also examined Andrei's foxhole, then winked his left eye and stuck his short turned-up nose into the air.

"Look at how he's fixed himself up! Not thinking of spending the winter here, are you?"

"Well, that's a possibility," replied Andrei.

"Huh!" Degtyarev flashed his buck teeth. "You're not only a quiet fellow; you're a queer one to boot. Listen to him talk! What we'll do is spend the night here and be on our way in the morning. How many times has it happened? Forgotten?"

"And suppose we don't go any farther?"

"What do you mean not go? What would you do?"

"What would I do?" Andrei's high white forehead suddenly glistened with sweat. "And what if I dig into the earth here and become part of it?" he said in the same quiet, thoughtful voice. "And don't go any farther. Then what?"

Degtyarev stared wide-eyed at Andrei.

"What a man!" he said, and shook his head.

"Just the kind of man we need," Yurgin said as he crawled out of Andrei's foxhole, which he had inspected to see if it would be convenient to fire from. "It's time we all thought the same way: make a

stand and hold firm, as we're told! It's all right, Andrei, this is a good place to fire from."

Behind Yurgin rose the startlingly tall and lean figure of Ivan Umrikhin. He had been called up from the reserves only recently and was the oldest man in the squad. His long head, with its broad, flattened nose was always held high on his scrawny, sunburned neck, and he constantly seemed to be asking, "Where's the draft coming from?" The coppery stubble on his chin and cheeks grew so rapidly and was so stiff that the entire squad took turns shaving him and had already ruined all their razors. Everybody knew that despite his ungainly body Umrikhin was quick and agile in battle, had a peasant's cunning and was no coward. But for some reason he was always assuring everyone that he was afraid of war and death.

"Make a stand and hold firm!" Umrikhin repeated the squad leader's words slowly and thoughtfully in his hoarse voice, and when the others turned to him, he again said, "Make a stand and hold firm! Well, that's to be seen. They say you have to fight force with force. What are you going to do if they're stronger? You'll see, tomorrow they'll bring up tanks. . . ."

Yurgin interrupted him angrily. "So what? Trying to scare us again, are you? Well, cut it out, you bean pole! That's a fine habit you've got!"

"How can I scare anybody, Comrade Sergeant?"

Umrikhin asked in a sad, placatory voice. "I'm scared myself!"

"What the devil about?"

"It's the same thing again—my height," Umrikhin explained deliberately. "I'm the most noticeable man in the regiment. I bend over to the ground when I'm running and still my back sticks up above the bushes. You can see me from a terribly great distance, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Yes, your old man didn't use his head!" Degtyarev put in gaily. "Look how much material he wasted on you! Enough for two soldiers easily!"

"You're right there!" Umrikhin agreed fullheartedly. "And it would have been better."

"The main thing is that each one would have got less foolishness," Yurgin said. "You drew too much of it for one man."

Umrikhin sighed, noisily blew his generous nose, and then replied gloomily, but without rancour. "No, you don't understand my lot!" He lifted his finger high. "And have you considered my name? Umri-khin.* Try going to war with a name like that. Even living at home with it was bad enough at times. No, my good friends, I'm marked for death!"

Degtyarev laughed. "Of course you are! A hundred years from now!"

* The Russian word "umri" means "die."—*Trans.*

"You make a joke out of everything, Semyon! If it gets tough for you in battle you can dive down the first mouse hole, and you're gone!"

"It won't get tough for me, I'm no young lady," Degtyarev answered sharply. "If a regular battle starts I won't go crawling down holes. I don't belong to your family."

"What about my family?"

"All right, men, that will do!" Yurgin raised his voice. "Starting a quarrel, they are!"

Andrei, who had been silent all this time, could no longer keep from interfering; he disliked quarrels.

"All right, all right, fellows!" he said. "A fine thing to be doing! Let's better eat up what I have left here. Come on, who's going to help?"

They all sat down beside the foxhole. Andrei opened his knapsack and began to distribute the homemade treats: slices of roast beef, and pies stuffed with chopped carrot and berries. "I wonder how it is at home," he sighed to himself, as he had sighed so many times that day. "Maybe the Germans are there already." Three other men of the squad, Martyanov, Volnykh and Glukhan, came up. It was a long time since any of them had tasted home cooking and for the second time that day they helped themselves generously to Andrei's supply.

The sun was already low over the distant groves. All along the line work was still going on. On the hill to the right, not far off, a machine gun began to chatter angrily, getting the range.

"Now we've stopped again," Umrikhin remarked gloomily.

"Yes, it's a long way we've retreated!"

"And we just keep on retreating and retreating!"

"No other way out," Umrikhin said. "They're strong!"

"Why are they any stronger?" Andrei joined in the conversation. "We've got more people. And machine might—it can't go everywhere; it hasn't any brains, or any special skill, or craftiness either. . . ."

"A machine is a fool, but the Germans are crafty on it!"

"Crafty, the bastards!"

"There isn't a craftier nation."

"Look how they go rolling along!"

"And what a chunk they've grabbed!" Degtyarev angrily flung down the bone he had been gnawing.

"They'll choke quicker on a big piece!" Matvei Yurgin remarked in a sullen and rather sharp tone as he broke off a chunk of berry pie.

"Now that Hitler," Umrikhin began, with the air of one who had lived longer than the rest, as he tossed crumbs into his mouth. "Right now he's aiming straight for Moscow—"

"Aiming?" Martyanov, young and fair-headed, interrupted. "They like the looks of Moscow, the skunks, do they? They haven't got the brains to get to Moscow!"

"They won't take Moscow. They better not think they can!"

"Let them think they can. They won't be able to anyway!"

"Never!" Degtyarev declared heatedly. "Lots of things can happen, but they won't see Moscow any more than they can see their own ears. Moscow wasn't made for the Germans! The whole country will rise up—and Moscow, it won't surrender. That will never happen!"

"Moscow? Surrender it?"

"Moscow," Andrei said thoughtfully, choosing a moment when the men had calmed down somewhat. "Dammit, they say it's a lovely town. I've never been there, but it seems to me I'm there in spirit all the time. Moscow!" he repeated, lowering his eyelashes. "To give it up would be like giving up your own soul. That's the way I see it."

The men began to talk again. All but Yurgin, who munched silently on his berry pie and listened, glancing from one to another. And when they began, as soldiers so frequently did, to discuss what they thought should be done to save Moscow and rout the German hordes advancing on it, he remarked quietly, but so that all the men heard him:

"Now you're beginning to talk nonsense. . . ." Then he continued in a louder voice: "What should be done? How? If you get down to it, we're to blame for everything ourselves." He juggled a small grey stone in the palm of his hand. "Take a look at this!"

"Flint?" Andrei asked.

"Yes, I picked it up on the road. There it was, lying there, grey and unnoticeable. There's some who would wonder what it's good for. Just a stone, they would think. But now take a look!"

Out of his pocket Yurgin pulled a piece of a file he used as a striker. He glanced quickly at the men and then struck the flint. A shower of big sparks flew up. With another glance at the men Yurgin began to strike the flint again and again.

"See?"

"What's the point?" Glukhan asked.

"Each one of us," Yurgin said, "ought to be like this flint. Each one ought to have as much fire and strength and resistance. And more anger! Anger black as tar. So that it clouds your whole heart! And then the war would turn to there right away!" He motioned toward the west. "Turn and burn all those Germans to a cinder, curse their souls! Strike me down if I'm not right!"

He moved Andrei's knapsack aside, indicating that it was time to finish eating.

"How and what?" he remarked abruptly, once again glancing at the silent men. "What's the use of trying to guess?"

He pulled out a battered tin box that had once held tooth powder and in which he now kept his tobacco. The others also began to reach for their pouches; all felt a desire to smoke after the snack. Makhorka had been issued at dinnertime, but none of them had any paper. Knowing this, Umrikhin immediately sidled up to the squad leader.

"You haven't a bit of paper on you, have you, Comrade Sergeant?" he asked.

"Wait, I'll have to look for it. . . ."

Just then a cry of "Pla-anes!" came to them.

Immediately everybody looked up and heard the distant, harrowing drone of motors. Then German bombers were silhouetted against the sky as they emerged from a smoky grey cloud bank. They headed straight for the positions of the regiment. All along the line came the familiar, long drawn-out orders:

"Pla-anes!"

"To the tre-enches!"

"Pla-anes!"

Yurgin sprang to his feet. "Into the trenches!" he said quietly.

Before it reached the line where Voloshin's regiment had halted, the leading Junkers broke away from the rest. In all the trenches helmets popped

out of sight. But the Junkers reached the line without losing altitude. Only after flying a short distance over the forest behind did it go into a dive—and the wild scream of its siren filled the air. The German pilot must have known his target well, for he wasted no time examining it from above. And by the time the other planes had spread out in bombing formation he had already dropped his lethal load. Far beyond the forest something crashed, as into an abyss, and then again and again, and a hollow autumnal echo rolled over the countryside. . . .

XV

The men watched the planes until they disappeared in the bank of clouds, and then, swearing excitedly, they drifted back to Andrei's trench.

"They were bombing the bridge," Andrei told them. "Across the Vazuza."

"Is it far to this Vazuza?" Yurgin asked.

"A good seven kilometres it'll be."

"Deep?"

"In places you can ford it and in others you have to swim," Andrei replied. "Now that it's autumn it's deep and fast. The infantry could manage it, but for the trucks and guns it's bad."

The soldiers settled themselves beside the trench. Now they all wanted to smoke more than ever. Again Ivan Umrikhin sidled up to Yurgin.

"So how about it, Comrade Sergeant? You haven't a bit of paper to spare, have you?" he asked dolefully. "You won't believe it, but not one of us has a speck! We peeled off the bark on all the birch trees we passed today!"

"Wait, I'll take a look."

Yurgin drew a small, badly-frayed army newspaper out of his pocket and began to unfold it in his lap. The men all crowded around him, reaching for their pouches. But Yurgin shook his head. "No, I'm all out of paper too," he said.

"What about that?" someone asked over his shoulder.

Just then they all saw the familiar portrait of Comrade Stalin. Semyon Degtyarev was the first to move away from Yurgin.

"We can't use that," he said sternly. "Save it."

"No, we can't!" Umrikhin agreed with a sigh.

"Suppose we smoke a pipe," Matvei Yurgin suggested. "An old kolkhoz fellow gave me a pipe in a village we passed through yesterday. A fine old man! He probably carved it himself out of a birch root. It'll be enough for the whole squad. Shall I get it out?"

The pipe was lighted and it traveled from hand to hand. The makhorka in it crackled, and throats rasped from the bitter smoke. Restraining a cough with difficulty, Matvei Yurgin resumed the conversation.

"There's no need to guess," he said, tapping the newspaper in his lap. "Here it is, all put clearly. Or have you forgotten?"

"No, of course we haven't," Umrikhin answered for all of them, trying to keep the pipe in his possession as long as possible without its being noticed. "And it wouldn't do us any harm to hear it again, of course. Read it, Comrade Sergeant, while we smoke."

Yurgin picked up the newspaper.

" 'What is required,' " he began from a place that he had marked in pencil, " 'to put an end to the danger which overhangs our country, and what measures must be taken to crush the enemy?' "

He lowered the paper slowly, as though to give the men time to ponder on what they had heard, and then continued unhurriedly, dividing the sentences into phrases, and sometimes the phrases into words:

" 'Above all it is essential that our people, the Soviet people, should appreciate the full immensity of the danger that threatens our country and cast off complacency, carelessness and the mentality of peaceful constructive work. . . .' "

"What kind of constructive work can there be!" Martyanov interrupted.

"Don't interrupt," Umrikhin said sternly, waving the pipe at him.

Matvei Yurgin completed the sentence, paused again, and then continued in a harsher voice:

" 'The enemy is cruel and implacable. He is out to seize our lands which have been watered by the sweat of our brow, to seize our grain and oil which have been obtained by the labour of our hands. He is out to restore the rule of the landlords, to restore tsarism. . . .' " Yurgin's voice grew stronger and stronger; it became filled with menacing, wrathful power. " 'Thus, the issue is one of life and death for the Soviet State, of life and death for the peoples of the U.S.S.R., of whether the peoples of the Soviet Union shall be free or fall into slavery. . . .' "

Matvei Yurgin stopped. Suddenly his face seemed more wrinkled than ordinarily. Drawing a breath, he parted his wind-chapped lips and angrily drew them back at the corners.

"Understand?" he asked brusquely. Without waiting for an answer he glanced at Andrei and then said: "And for that we don't feed them noodles, the swine!"

Andrei's face and ears flamed red. There was a catch in his throat. He did not answer immediately, and when he did it was with great difficulty.

"But why, but why do you have to bring those noodles up, Comrade Sergeant? I wish he'd choked on them!"

The men all maintained a cold silence.

" 'Further, there must be no room in our ranks for whimperers and cowards, and deserters. . . .' "

"You left out something," Degtyarev put in.

"Yes, you're right, I left out one word," said Yurgin, smoothing the newspaper. "This place is almost rubbed through." He began the sentence again: " 'Further, there must be no room in our ranks for whimperers and cowards, for panicmongers and deserters; our people must know no fear in the fight and must selflessly join our Patriotic War of liberation against the fascist enslavers.' "

Yurgin began to fold up the paper. "See how clearly it's all put here?"

The men all began to talk at once, but Matvei Yurgin, glancing toward the west, slowly rose from his place.

"That's right, fellows," Umrikhin said. "We'll come back to it later. Now it's time for a rest. Look at how far we marched today, and then all this digging! My hands and feet ache and feel like they belonged to somebody else. It's time we took a rest."

"You'll have a chance to rest a little later," Yurgin said.

"When is that?"

"After the war."

Umrikhin gave a long whistle. "Oh, damn! And how about now?"

Yurgin's eyes flashed.

"Up!" he shouted.

XVI

The sun sank behind the distant groves in the west, flooding them with smoky purple rays. Dusk crept up on all sides. The earth stopped trembling. The sky became quiet too. Some two hundred metres behind the firing line Yurgin's squad spread out fanwise and began to dig trenches again.

"There's a tough devil for you," Umrikhin grumbled.

"Stop whining," said Degtyarev, who was digging next to him. "I'm fed up. My eardrums can't stand it any longer! Why are you so sore at him? Better get sore at those Germans!"

"He never leaves us in peace."

"Huh, the man wants peace! In the middle of a war!"

A small group came into sight from behind.

"Officers," Andrei warned the men.

They all straightened up beside their trenches. Lieutenant Loznevoi left the group and strode rapidly over to Yurgin; his cape-tent, worn over his greatcoat, billowed out and dragged along the grass like a vestment.

"Where the hell have you got to?" he started shouting as he came up. "Who gave you permission to dig here?" Walking up to Yurgin he pointed his finger at the west. "There's the place to dig! Have you gone blind? Over there, where the men are!"

Yurgin saluted. "Comrade Senior Lieutenant—" he began.

"That will do! Everyone was told to dig over there!"

The other officers approached. In the lead was the tall heavy-set Captain Ozerov, dressed as always in a soldier's khaki padded jacket that was comfortable to march, work and fight in. Loznevoi was shaking with indignation. His cold, iron-grey eyes blazing, he walked up to Ozerov. "You see the kind of men we have to deal with, Comrade Captain? You tell them one thing and they do it their own way. It was clearly stated that trenches should be dug over there."

Ozerov recognized Yurgin. "Well, neighbour," he said. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Comrade Captain," Yurgin began, without raising his voice. "We have already dug trenches where we were supposed to. Here the platoon commander gave us permission. Just look at the kind of trenches they are—fake ones to fool the Germans!"

"Ah, so that's it!" Ozerov said, pleased.

"It's according to the regulations—"

"Clear, Yurgin!" Ozerov turned to Loznevoi, who was looking from side to side in confusion. "Now you see, don't you? It seems the men are not so tired but what they can dig mock trenches on their own initiative." He suddenly flung out his arm. "Go ahead! Dig as many as you can. Tell the artillery to build mock positions too. And let them camouflage the main ones so that they can't be seen from near! The entire firing system must be camouflaged before the fighting begins. A sudden blow is the most effective. We should know that by now!"

Loznevoi saluted. "Yes, Comrade Captain," he said dejectedly.

Ozerov glanced at the men, who had silently formed a group about him. Noticing men from the reserves among them, he asked:

"Do you all know how to throw grenades?"

"More or less. . . ." the men answered slowly.

Ozerov turned to Umrikhin. "You—do you know how?"

"I was shown once," Umrikhin began evasively.

"Well, you show us now."

Nervously Umrikhin unfastened a grenade from his belt. From the way he handled the pin it was clear that he was not accustomed to dealing with grenades. The men expected Ozerov to give him a dressing-down that would make the rest of them sick. But Ozerov merely sighed, took the grenade

from Umrikhin's hand and showed how to fix it for the throw. Then he asked the soldiers around him:

"Is it clear now?" He stepped forward. "And this is how you throw it!"

They all thought Ozerov was just going to make the gesture of throwing, but instead he drew back his arm and suddenly let the grenade fly.

"Down!" he shouted while it was still in the air.

Everybody dropped to the ground. There was an explosion, and a black bush of earth and smoke sprang up some forty metres away. Shrapnel sang by softly overhead.

Ozerov was the first one up.

"Didn't get anyone, did it?"

Talking excitedly, the men picked themselves up.

"That's bad!" Ozerov exclaimed. "I see some of you are still afraid of fire. That's very bad! Don't be afraid!" he shouted. "Whoever is afraid will get killed."

"It was all so unexpected," Loznevoi said as he disentangled himself from his cape-tent.

"Everything is unexpected in battle." Then Ozerov snapped out: "Make sure all the men know how to throw grenades and fire bottles. Those who don't must be taught during the night."

"Yes, Comrade Captain!" Loznevoi answered.

Ozerov turned to the men. "Did you hear what

I said? There is only one order I have for you: Stand here until told to move. If tanks come—stand! If infantry comes—stand! Let the Germans pay with their heads and their black blood for every inch of our land. Not a step back! That's the way to make a stand!"

Ozerov left, and Yurgin's squad got down to work again. The spades rang often, for they were digging in stony earth. After a while Umrikhin took a look around, and then said to Degtyarev in a low, hoarse voice:

"See what happened?"

"About the grenade? I saw how little you knew about it."

"Then you didn't see well," Umrikhin noted with a sigh. "It was my grenade and it almost killed me! A piece of shrapnel parted my hair! A little lower and it would have been the end of me. No, it's clear I'm not going to live long with a name like mine. Well, when I die I'll take a grenade along with me. I know how to throw them now. I've been taught. In the other world I'll find the man who thought up the name for our family and I'll let him have that grenade so that he'll never be able to collect his guts again. That's all I'll have to say to him!"

Twilight rapidly descended over the earth.

XVII

Voloshin's regiment had taken up good positions for defence. On the right flank Battalion One, under Captain Bolotin, had straddled the highway and dug in along the edge of a wood; beyond lay swampy ground covered with birch and alder groves. Zhuravsky's battalion had cut the highway on the left flank and stood in front of the dark wall of a forest. Between the positions of the two battalions lay a rolling field with faint, winding cart tracks which the summer's growth of grass had almost blotted out. Here, in the centre of the line, stood Battalion Three, under Lieutenant Loznevoi. Behind it also rose a big forest of mixed trees stretching away to the Vazuza.

On this line Major Voloshin's regiment could undoubtedly hold the enemy back a long time. During the retreat the regiment had had only minor engagements with enemy reconnaissance groups and had lost few men. More than two thousand men were now stretched out in a winding line over several kilometres from the forest to the swamp. They were entrenching themselves, with their machine guns, rifles and grenades. To defend the positions, especially the highways along which German columns were advancing, the artillerymen had set up all the regiment guns and

some of the guns of the anti-tank battalion attached to the regiment.

The defences were set up under the immediate direction of Captain Ozerov. He tore along the line, sometimes on horseback, sometimes on foot, only rarely sitting down for a smoke. He made a personal check-up of how all the company defence sections and their main strongpoints had been chosen, how the main and reserve positions were set up, and how the guns that were to fire with open sights were stationed. Captain Ozerov clearly realized that the advancing Germans would open up on them with a vastly superior fire power, and hence he devoted special attention to the distribution, camouflaging and coordination of the regiment's system of fire. He issued a stern order to his officers to have the main firing points carefully hidden from the enemy before the fighting began; they were to be brought into action only at the decisive moments, and as unexpectedly as possible. The captain planned a number of highly unpleasant surprises for the Germans in the coming battle. These surprises were to compensate to a considerable degree the regiment's deficiency in fire power and hence, at least to a certain extent, equalize the two opposing forces.

By nightfall all the main work was completed. Not without fuss and mistakes, in the end each company, and each fighting man in each company,

had taken up their position on the line. The defences had been set up according to all the rules of the Infantry Combat Regulations—rules long since confirmed and tested in the army.

Nevertheless Captain Ozerov was not satisfied with what had been done. He was pursued by the feeling that somewhere in the hastily-erected defences there was a flaw. But no matter how much he pondered he could not detect it. He merely felt it with his officer's special sixth sense.

When the captain ran into Yakhno, the regiment commissar, in Battalion Three he was overjoyed. It was the first time he had seen Yakhno that day; in general, it was only by accident that one ever met the commissar. The thin, slight Yakhno was a great walker; from sunrise to sunset he roamed among the various units, always finding work for himself to do. He was a newcomer in the regiment. From the very first his relations with Major Voloshin had been strained: the major, a man fond of power and spoiled by the respect accorded him, did not want to share his authority with the commissar. Apparently Commissar Yakhno felt that now, when they were retreating, was not a suitable time to bring up the matter of power. For the time being he did not want to make his relations with Voloshin more acute, and so he kept apart. The work he carried on in the regiment was not always evident, but for

all that it was very important. In the short time he had been with them, almost all the men had come to know and to love him.

Like Ozerov, that evening Commissar Yakhno was on the defence line all the time. He kept his political instructors busy. They made use of the pauses for smoking to hold short meetings of Party members and talk with the men in all the companies. They explained just one thing to the men: until the order came to retreat they had to hold the Germans at that line by every means possible. In the course of the evening, without interfering with the main work, the commissar was able to raise the men's fighting spirit, to prepare them inwardly for the battle.

Commissar Yakhno was also glad to see Captain Ozerov. He immediately pulled him off to the side. "Come, Captain, let's walk away a bit," he said.

The dusk was thickening. Captain Ozerov could barely make out the expression on Commissar Yakhno's face, but he felt that he was in a cheerful mood, even somewhat uplifted. Stopping in a little hollow about a hundred metres from the command point of Battalion Three, Yakhno turned about, a short, slight man in an unbuttoned greatcoat, and with an indefinite wave of his hand began to speak in his usual rapid manner.

"A battle, eh? A real battle?"

"I think there'll be a real battle here," Ozerov replied. "You haven't got an easy job."

"But it will be our victory—yes!" Yakhno declared sharply, as if Ozerov were trying to prove the opposite to him. "Ours!" He bent over and plucked a barely visible pale autumn flower. "I smell victory at a distance, the way I do the odour of this flower!"

Even in the dusk the smile that lit up the intelligent, still youthful face of the commissar could be seen. Ozerov took the flower and raised it to his nose.

"Unfortunately, not everyone smells it, particularly at a distance," he replied soberly.

Yakhno caught Ozerov by the button of his padded jacket. "Not everyone? Is that what you think?"

"Yes, I do."

"Let's go over there!" Yakhno suddenly suggested, and kicking back the folds of his coat he strode out of the hollow to a small hillock on which a single wild rosebush grew. "It's more comfortable in a padded jacket, isn't it?" he asked as he waited for the slower moving Ozerov to reach the top. "I'll start wearing one too. You know, I need something simple and light, something that won't hamper me. . . ." He came up to Ozerov. "Yes, when an army has been retreating for four months not everyone is able to

keep his sense of smell keen. To some it seems there's only the smell of blood and corpses now." He gave a shiver of distaste. "But most of the men believe in victory. And I'll tell you something: they believe in it even more persistently today than they did the first day of the war. This I can feel strongly. Just consider the distance they covered today and the amount of earth they threw up, and yet they're all ready to fight right this minute, if need be. All of them, or almost all of them, are sure of success. And the most important thing in war is the mood in which a soldier goes into battle. You'll see: tomorrow all our men, and the Communists especially, will fight like lions. And victory will be ours! The German columns must be halted, and the regiment will do it!"

As he listened to Yakhno, Ozerov felt genuinely sorry that such a commissar had joined the regiment so late.

"Of course they'll fight," he agreed. "But morale isn't the only factor in battle."

"Look here, what are you displeased about?"

"I really don't know myself," Ozerov confessed. "I have a queer feeling, Comrade Commissar. I can't put my finger on it. I see that we seem to be doing everything properly. I've personally inspected and checked up on everything. And still

the idea keeps nagging me that somewhere, in something, a mistake has been made!"

Yakhno reflected a moment. "Let's walk off a bit farther," he suggested again. "Over this way."

When they stopped again he immediately began to talk rapidly and brusquely, just as though he wanted to start quarrelling with Ozerov but did not know how.

"I'm not a very experienced military man," he began. "But I know what an officer should be like. He should do more thinking before a battle than during it or afterwards. And he should be able to see farther and better than all his subordinates!" Again he caught Ozerov by his jacket button. "What do you see? Well, what?"

"I can't make it out!"

"Use your eyes!" Yakhno almost shouted. "You have keen ones. Use your eyes! Look," he said in a calmer voice, "the fate of thousands of men lies in our hands. We have to fight, but we must try to lose as few lives as possible."

"I'll think about it some more," Ozerov promised.

"Think, old man, think some more," Yakhno said gently. "All my hopes are pinned on you," he confessed suddenly, for the first time. He paused a moment. "Voloshin is at the command post, isn't he?"

"That's right."

"Yes, it isn't that he's old—but still he isn't what he was," Yakhno said in answer to some thought of his own. "When you return to the command post tell him I'm staying with Bolotin's battalion. Until the end of the battle. Tomorrow I must be among the men. By the way, why should I trouble you? I can call him up myself."

Night fell. Far away on the flanks the sky grew purple, as it had all that summer, and signal flares quivered there like birds, but in front of the line everything was swallowed up in a profound darkness. The sound of talking and the rattle of messtins came from the firing line as the men began their delayed supper.

When he said goodbye to Ozerov Yakhno silently seized his hand in the dark. In his clenched fist the captain still held the flower he had picked.

"You smell the odour, don't you?" Yakhno asked softly.

"I do," Ozerov answered in a whisper.

"Well, I wish you luck, old man!"

XVIII

Major Voloshin spent all his time at the command post. The spot for the command post had been chosen far behind Loznevoi's battalion, on the edge of the big forest of mixed trees, which rose in a varicoloured drop curtain against the eastern sky.

Here sappers spent the entire night digging slits and building blindages.

In the evening Major Voloshin had still hoped that all the units which had reached the crossing would succeed in gaining the other side of the river that night. In that case his regiment would be able to leave the defence line—by dawn at any rate—without giving battle, and, God willing, would also manage to put the Vazuza between itself and the enemy. But an hour after the air raid a messenger arrived from General Borodin, the division commander, with bad news: the Germans had smashed the bridge across the Vazuza. According to the messenger, General Borodin was doing everything possible to restore the bridge that night. Major Voloshin then realized that a battle was inevitable: traffic across the Vazuza would be resumed no sooner than morning, and in the morning the Germans would undoubtedly reach his positions. The line would have to be held, held to the last man, in order to give the others time to get away across the river—and it was terrifying to think of what would happen to the regiment. After his talk with the messenger Major Voloshin lost the last hopes that had stiffened his will power till then.

All night he did not leave the command post, and most of the time he spent alone in his field tent. There was a dull ringing in his head. "Prob-

ably from the helmet," Voloshin decided. "Dragging around such a weight on the top of your head from morning to night." Rocking the light folding table with his elbows, time and again he seized the telephone, checked on how the work was coming along in the battalions, shouted at the battalion commanders—although he did not feel they were in any way to blame—and endlessly demanded they hurry to strengthen the defences. Then he would fling down the receiver, go outside and stand listening and peering into the darkness; then go in to see the chief of staff for the hundredth time. The chief of staff would tear himself away from a map of the defences with undisguised annoyance.

"Don't get up, don't get up," Voloshin would say, glancing over the chief of staff's shoulder. "Well, how goes it?"

"It will be ready soon."

Major Voloshin had heard a lot about how expert the Germans were at encircling enemy forces and dealing them sudden flanking blows, and for this reason he was more worried about his flanks than anything else.

"Look here, old man, do you know for sure that the swamps on the right flank are impassable?"

"The information is exact."

"And there are neither roads nor lanes in that forest on the left flank? I see there are none marked

on the map, but when was the map made? Maybe they were laid afterward?"

"The forest is also impassable. It is absolutely safe there."

"Where is it dangerous then? On the highways?"

"Undoubtedly. The Germans are moving along them in columns. The highways are where they will deliver their main blows."

"Are there enough guns there?"

"Quite enough. Almost all of them have been set up there."

"And men? Enough?"

"Yes, enough men too."

"Well, watch out," Voloshin threatened with a wheeze.

He did not sleep all night. When, just before daybreak, he had received the latest reports from the battalions and looked over a completed plan of the defences, he became fully convinced that everything had been thoroughly planned and prepared to meet the enemy. But even then his uneasiness did not depart. In vain he tried to persuade himself that his regiment would be able to withstand the enemy onslaught at least until noon. And if it did hold out—then what?

At dawn Major Voloshin lay down on his cot, unbuttoned his jacket and began to rub his hairy chest. Adjutant Tseluiko glanced into the tent. "Your heart?" he asked in alarm.

"Yes," Voloshin groaned.

Before Voloshin had a chance to take his drops the telephone started to buzz insistently. Voloshin rolled over on his cot and caught up the receiver. "Bolotin, is it?" he asked.

"Zero nine," the voice in the receiver replied.

Voloshin caught himself. "Yes, yes." He had completely forgotten about the code. "Appeared, have they?"

Captain Bolotin reported that German motorcycles had been seen on the highway. The combat outpost had fired on them. The Germans had jumped off their motorcycles, scattered to the sides of the road and answered with tommy-gun fire. A skirmish was in progress. Bolotin spoke hurriedly, and, it seemed to Voloshin, happily.

"What are you so pleased about?" he shouted, quivering with emotion.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Bolotin answered. "We're giving them hell! We'll finish them off right away!"

Voloshin took a deep breath. "Oh, you fighting cock! You be careful. Open more fire! More! Do you hear?"

"Yes, Comrade Major!" Bolotin rejoiced.

"Keep in touch with me!"

"Yes, Comrade Major!"

Major Voloshin held the receiver a moment longer before putting it back on the rest. His chief

of staff and his adjutant were already in the tent. From outside came the sound of hurried footsteps and voices. Voloshin silently reached for the medicine glass half filled with greenish liquid. The telephone gave a short, unwilling ring. Voloshin glanced at the chief of staff.

"Zhuravsky?" he asked.

"That's right."

Voloshin seized the receiver. "Yes, yes!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Well, speak up, speak up, what is it? Get rid of that cigarette!"

"I'm not smoking," Zhuravsky replied.

"Yes you are. Well, what is it?"

"Germans. In a truck."

"One truck?"

"Yes, one."

"And no more?"

"Just one."

"Look here, what in the world are you chewing on?" cried Voloshin, a flush of anger staining his face. "Speak to the point! What are you doing?"

"Skirmishing," Zhuravsky replied unhurriedly.

"Hit them harder! Don't spare the bullets! See that—can you hear me? Are you there?"

"Yes, yes."

Only after that did Major Voloshin seize the glass and gulp down the liquid.

"More!" he flung out with a glance at his adjutant.

"You shouldn't, Comrade Major. It's medicine."

Major Voloshin looked at the glass, then set it down near the telephone. His hairy chest was heaving.

"Well, what have you to say?" he asked, turning to the chief of staff.

"It's a reconnaissance," the latter replied.

"Well, I'll step out and see what I can hear . . . ."

Beyond the Vazuza the sun was rising, and the forest was bathed in a rosy glow. On the right flank, Bolotin's, several machine guns were hammering away spasmodically, and anti-tank guns were chattering hollowly in unison. On the left flank, where Zhuravsky was, the crackle of rifle and machine-gun fire was rapidly gaining intensity. Only in the centre of the line, held by Loznevoi, was there an expectant autumnal silence. "The flanks, the flanks," Voloshin thought again. "I knew it!" He heard a saw buzzing not far away. Then the voices of sappers came over, and a tall pine crashed into the thick underwood. "It grew and grew," the thought flashed through Voloshin's mind, "and then—there it lies!"

XIX

Captain Ozerov spent the entire night with the battalions. He did not succeed in discovering any flaw in the defences, yet his anxiety did not pass.

At dawn he was summoned to the regiment command post. On the way there he was amazed to hear heavy firing break out on the highways.

Near the post he tossed his padded jacket to a messenger and strode quickly toward the major's dugout. Ozerov's boots were covered with clayey mud and his pock-mocked face was grimy with sweat and dust. A thick reddish stubble had sprouted out on his cheeks during the night.

Major Voloshin was sitting outside, hunched over on a stump. Ozerov could not contain himself. After reporting his arrival, he at once said, in a restrained voice: "Comrade Major, may I? Just what are they doing, Bolotin and Zhuravsky?" He motioned toward the line. "What is going on over there?"

"You really don't know?" Voloshin asked with a frown.

"I am convinced that it is only a reconnaissance group. It can't be anything else. What is the matter? Can't our battalion commanders restrain themselves? Or have they gone mad? Why do they have to give away our entire system of fire?" Ozerov's eyes blazed a vivid angry blue. "We struggled all night to build a good fire system and hide it from the enemy until the battle started—and they go and give it away! And where? On the highways! That's just what the German scouts wanted to know! That's why they came up. Now they—"

"All right, that will do!" Voloshin interrupted. "I gave that order. Do you understand? I don't know which is better in our position—to reveal our system of fire to the Germans or not."

Ozerov fidgeted with his belt in confusion. "Secrecy is an additional weapon," he said.

"Where's that from? Clauzewitz again?" Voloshin rose heavily and said, without looking at Ozerov: "I need you. The Vazuza bridge is smashed. They are repairing it, but we do not know when traffic will begin. General Borodin is in charge of all the work there. According to his order our rear services are to cross the river together with the division. Ride over at once and see for yourself whether all our rear services are at the Vazuza. Find out from the general himself when the division will start to cross and when everything will be finished. And get back here as soon as possible."

"Yes, Comrade Major!"

"You may go."

A few minutes later Captain Ozerov was galloping toward the Vazuza, angrily applying the whip to his golden stallion. "The whole thing is," he said to himself, "that we still don't know how to fight properly. That's probably our greatest misfortune. Men like Voloshin just spoil things. We're cleverer than the Germans in every way. There's no doubt about that. Why shouldn't we be cleverer when it comes to war too?" And Ozerov pondered

on many other things, without noticing the flecks of foam that flew from the stallion he was still lashing with the whip.

From the forest in which the regiment command post was located the road led up into an open field from which the spring crops had been harvested. Had it been peacetime this field would be lying black from recent ploughing; now not a single furrow was to be seen. In places there were even flattened stacks of oats and buckwheat the owners had failed to take in. From the field the road dipped steeply to the dark forest along the Vazuza, with little rises on the way; almost the whole length of it was visible from the highest point of the field.

It was here that Ozerov, calming down a bit, realized that he had to give his horse a breathing spell. He dropped the reins and looked ahead. It was queer, but it seemed to him that never before had he taken in such a large and wonderful expanse in one glance as now spread before him from the top of that bare elevation. Through the broad lowland flowed the beautiful Vazuza, rosy in the dawn, with a slight mist rising from it. Upstream, to the south, dense forests with brilliant patches of copper and of autumnal brocade stretched away to the horizon. Downstream, to the north, wide, rolling country dotted with small clusters of houses also reached to the horizon. Alone on the hillocks rose proud, stately old oaks, guarding like shepherds the spin-

neys scattered over the slopes. Straight ahead across the Vazuza, in the direction of Moscow, the eastern sky was gilded with sunrise. Ozerov had witnessed the sunrise many times that summer, but he felt he had never yet seen such a calm yet majestic dawn as was now breaking over the enormous world of forest, field and hamlets.

This magnificent view of his vast country at dawn brought Ozerov quick and sudden reassurance. "No, no one will ever be able to conquer such a land," he thought to himself triumphantly. "We will endure everything, survive everything! Yes—soon we will turn around and feast our eyes upon the sunset."

He let his horse take the slope at a walk.

The entire forest along the Vazuza had been hacked away at by German planes until it looked as though a hurricane of unbelievable violence had swept through it. Trees stood minus their crowns and with scorched branches. Many lay uprooted, like giants felled on the field of battle. As though they were orderlies, two mighty elms were bearing a badly-wounded young oak to the edge of the forest. The few houses near the forest had been torn to fragments by bombs; even the huge Russian stoves had crashed in, scattering brick dust over the hedges. Nearby, on the very top of a crippled birch, hung a sheet of dented, rusty roofing deposited there by some miracle. Throughout the forest

and around it gaped bomb craters; all about were scattered the skeletons of burned-out trucks, the swollen bodies of dead horses, and the axles and wheels of wagons. Here and there lay black grave-mounds; little posts bearing boards with Russian names hastily scrawled on them in coloured pencil marked these fresh graves.

One would have expected every living being to flee this desolation without a backward glance. Yet the entire ravaged forest, all the little gullies near it and the bank of the Vazuza teemed with people. All about stood guns, trucks, wagons, field kitchens and ambulance carts. The place was dotted with bonfires, and the air was filled with the clamour of human voices, whistles, auto horns, neighing, mooing, the ring of axes, the creaking of wagons and the wailing of children. The whole camp surged in incomprehensible and complicated movement; yet one could feel that all the movement was directed to a single end, was guided by a single thought, which held complete sway over everybody there. The closer one came to the Vazuza the greater was the noise and movement. All this thundering conglomeration of people, trucks and wagons was streaming relentlessly toward the crossing, as though there existed no other exit from the forest.

Captain Ozerov gave a deep sigh of relief: he realized that the bridge had been restored. When he came closer to the river, however, he saw that

a battle seemed to be going on at the crossing, above which hung an incessant moan. A stream of trucks, guns and wagons was rattling over the narrow bridge to the eastern bank of the Vazuza, and only there, sensing freedom, did it divide into small rivulets. Above the bridge the infantry was crossing on the ferry, on rafts, in rowboats and by swimming. The refugees were making their way across below the bridge on whatever came to hand; together with them horses and cows were struggling desperately against the current, snorting and puffing, their heads held high. Thousands of people were hurrying to get across the Vazuza before the sun rose.

What was going on there alarmed Ozerov. But after he had found General Borodin on the bank a few hundred metres above the bridge he realized there was no reason for alarm. Things at the crossing were evidently going even better than was to have been expected.

The general was sitting on a cape-tent spread on the ground beside a small fire, leaning with his back against the broad stump of an elm eaten out by rot. A greatcoat covered his knees, and his boots hung on pegs near the fire. The general held his bare grey head and stiff, pointed moustache high, but his face was indifferent to the rumble and discordance that came from the river. The eyes, turned toward the sunrise, were tightly shut. Gen-

eral Borodin was sound asleep. A young soldier sitting on his haunches before the fire was drying the general's foot cloths, turning them over and over in his hands.

General Borodin was fast asleep, but he woke immediately he sensed the presence of a newcomer beside the fire. He received Ozerov, as it seemed to the latter, in an exceedingly tranquil and affectionate manner.

"You don't need to report, old man," he said as he started to wrap the cloths around his feet. "I know why you came." Accepting a boot from the soldier, he nodded toward the river. "See? Worked all night and did the job. I expect to have the entire bank cleared by twelve noon. Maybe even sooner. All the rear services of your regiment are here and will leave with the division. The order for your withdrawal will be given by radio. If conditions during the withdrawal are difficult—" here he knit his brows and reached for the other boot, "very difficult, then I do not advise you to withdraw to this crossing. This is an open place, and the river is deep here. It would be much better to go quite a way upstream through the forest. Today I was told that there are good fords there." He finished putting on his boots, twisted his moustache and then said, "Let's have the map."

As he unfolded it he glanced up at Ozerov several times, then frowned and twitched his mous-

tache in displeasure. Ozerov guessed at once why the general kept looking at him. "Excuse me, Comrade General," he said in embarrassment, fingering his chin.

"It's a very bad habit, that—to report in such a state," Borodin said sternly. "A very bad habit, Comrade Captain! Remember, next time I shall not put up with it!"

And then, quite independently of the general's remark, as it seemed, and even unexpectedly for himself, Ozerov felt for the second time that morning, with the kind of radiant joy which suffuses one's entire being, that the turning point in the war was not distant, and that no German force could ever break the calm, majestic and immortal spirit of the Russians.

XX

A clear, crisp morning spread over the earth.

When Captain Ozerov returned to the regiment command post he was struck by the stillness there. After their sleepless night many of the men and officers were dozing in their tents and dugouts. He could distinctly hear the falling leaves rustle against branches on their way down to the ground. There was a strong smell of upturned clay, dead ashes and resin.

Captain Ozerov reported his meeting with General Borodin to the regiment commander and then

went to his tent. Beside the tent his messenger, Petya Uralets, a soldier with big eyes and a prominent forehead, was rubbing down his sweating horse with a handful of grass.

"What's new around here, Petya?"

"Oh, you should have seen it, Comrade Captain!" Petya Uralets moved closer and began to speak in a rapid whisper. "A German plane flew over! As ugly as a gate it was, the damned thing, but could it fly!"

"Well?"

"He began to fly around overhead, and a soldier from the commandant's platoon went and took a shot at him! And then what happened!"

"Did he get it?"

"No, that's not what I mean!" Petya Uralets nodded in the direction of Voloshin's dugout and, waving his handful of grass, continued: "Then the major jumps out and roars, 'Who fired that shot? Who did it? Bring him here—I'll wring his neck, the scoundrel!' You should have seen it! He was shaking all over like he had a chill!"

"That's enough!" Ozerov ordered with a scowl. "And never let me hear you speak like that about the major again! Who gave you permission to judge your commander's actions? If he forbade it, that means it had to be forbidden. Do you understand?"

The embarrassed Petya Uralets straightened to attention. "Yes, I understand, Comrade Captain!"

"Give me my razor."

Captain Ozerov had just finished shaving his right cheek when guns began to thunder on the flank held by Bolotin's battalion. They were echoed almost instantly by guns from Zhuravsky's battalion on the other highway. A shudder ran through the earth. Gun crashes and the roar of explosions began to roll over the autumn countryside in broad waves. The regiment command post came to life in a flash. Throughout the wood alarmed voices spoke up. The telephone in the regiment commander's dugout started to ring. Adjutant Tseluiko burst out of the dugout and looked around wildly.

"Captain Ozerov, the major wants you!" he yelled.

The captain wiped the lather from his left cheek and immediately reported to the regiment commander's dugout. Major Voloshin flung the telephone receiver down on the rest. "Two messengers!" he barked.

The major's head was twitching and big drops of sweat were rolling down his cheeks.

"Tanks!" he shouted to Ozerov at the top of his voice, without turning toward him, however. "On the highways! I knew it!"

"Many?"

"The devil only knows! I can't get a sensible report out of Zhuravsky, and Bolotin's line is dead. Even so it's clear there's quite a number of them!"

The messengers ran into the dugout.

"Look—" Voloshin finally turned to Ozerov and held his inflamed gaze on him for a few seconds, as though he did not recognize the captain. "How many guns have we got on Loznevoi's sector?"

"Two batteries."

"Aha! Well, remove one and shift it to the flanks immediately. Only be quick about it, be quick!"

Ozerov gave a start. A dark flush spread over his cheeks. He suddenly saw the flaw in the regiment's defences. "The Germans won't advance where they'll meet strong resistance, where it's hard to get through!" he realized. "They'll go where it's easier to get through! And those are the only places they do get through. Why, it's clear! They'll strike at Loznevoi!"

"Comrade Major," Ozerov said, stepping closer to the regiment commander. "May I? It seems to me that enough guns and men have been placed in the area of the highways. Perhaps even more than necessary. And Loznevoi has little as it is.... If you nevertheless decide to transfer guns to the highways, let's take them from the reserve instead."

"From what reserve? Where is there a reserve?"

"Why, haven't we got one?"

The rumble of guns on the highways grew loud-

er. Major Voloshin wheeled about to face the messengers.

"You—" he pointed to one of them, "run over to Captain Bolotin! And you," he pointed to the other, "to Zhuravsky! And be quick about it! Tell them to send written reports about the situation at once. And tell them that we're now giving them a support of two guns each."

"Well, you're the one who decides," Ozerov said.

"Yes, I am!" Voloshin rejoined. "Now go over to Loznevoi and personally transfer the guns to the flanks."

"Yes, Comrade Major!"

Tseluiko ran into the dugout. "Planes!" he shouted.

The cry of "Planes!" "Planes!" was already echoing all over the edge of the forest.

Captain Ozerov dashed outside. Some twenty heavily-laden Junkers dive bombers were droning through the sky in a large quarter-circle. The sun was glittering on their greyish-yellow wings. When the leading plane came over the sector held by Loznevoi's battalion it plunged into a steep dive, and for miles around the air vibrated with its savage, bloodcurdling wail.

Soldiers were scattering about the forest with shouts. The earth shuddered violently, and a thick shower of leaves came down. Clouds of black smoke sprang up over Loznevoi's sector. "That's just what's

happening," Ozerov thought. "They're hitting at the centre of the line, which is defended much worse than the flanks. Why couldn't I have realized that before?"

Just then he saw the messengers Voloshin had sent out standing near a slit trench. "Come here!" he called with a sharp wave of his arm.

Again the earth shuddered.

"Go to where you've been sent at once!" At that moment Ozerov's appearance was terrifying. "Take this new order to the battalion commanders: to send two guns each to Battalion Three immediately! Report back to me! I'll be in the third!" He waved his hand toward the centre of the line, over which the German planes were roaring.

XXI

A few minutes before the bombing began Lieutenant Loznevoi had started out for the command post of Company Three with Lieutenant Khmelko and Kostya, his orderly; in the course of the night Loznevoi's spirits had sunk still lower, and all morning he had been wandering aimlessly over the line, but nowhere could he find peace of mind. They were already half way to the post when Loznevoi heard the throb of motors in the sky. Looking up, he immediately caught sight of a large group of Junkers bombers. They were flying along

slowly and heavily off to one side, and at first Loznevoi thought they would go on farther, to the Vazuza, perhaps. There was a strict order not to reveal their positions, however, and glancing back he shouted to his companions:

"Down!"

They all dropped to the trampled grass and lay still, following the planes with their eyes. "Now they'll reach the forest," each of them was thinking, "and then we can continue on our way." But when the planes came to the forest they began to describe a big semiarc in the powder-blue sky.

"Comrade Battalion Commander!" Khmelko shouted. "They're coming this way!"

"They're coming! They're coming!" Kostya cried, hiding in the grass.

They were on a bare, open meadow without a single ditch or hole. "Well, it looks as if my hour has come!" Loznevoi said to himself. His forehead grew damp. There was only one thought in his mind: he had to save himself. He leaped to his feet and yelled:

"Back! Follow me!"

The three sprinted at a crouch across the meadow, their spurs jangling, and came out on a big field covered with a thick rye stubble, also trampled by many feet. After another hundred yards Loznevoi felt a coughing spell coming on, and he realized that he could not make the command post,

where the sappers had built a good dugout for him during the night. It was too late. At that moment he noticed a shallow, hastily-dug foxhole. With a wave to his companions he dived into it—and instantly broke into a loud, racking cough. Khmelko and Kostya caught the signal and scattered to the sides, casting their eyes about for shelter.

When his coughing fit had subsided Loznevoi peered out of his foxhole. To the left, about thirty yards away, he saw the dull glint of a helmet above the stubble. "Khmelko. But where's Kostya?" He glanced to the right and a short distance away saw one of the numerous dummy anti-tank gun emplacements the artillerymen had prepared during the night at Ozerov's orders. The thin end of a small log pointed west over the breastwork of the rectangular hollow; around the log stood almost leafless birch saplings. Loznevoi realized that he had landed in one of the mock foxholes the artillerymen had dug at the same time to deceive the enemy. He clenched his teeth until they began to ache.

From the forward positions faint voices floated over: an officer was shouting at his men. Loznevoi looked ahead of him. A little way off, in a lane between rows of cut rye stalks, an ashen-grey field mouse was burrowing in the earth in a furrow made by the funnel of a seeder. Her dewdrops of eyes were sparkling merrily. She was gathering ears of rye. Something frightened her, and she whisked out

of sight. But a second later Loznevoi saw her bright little eyes again: her hole was nearby. "She's got a dugout!" he reflected. "She won't be caught!" And as he glanced about his mock foxhole he felt a cough welling up again in his feverish chest.

But it was too late to look for another place. The planes were already moving into line, and it became clear that their target was the centre of the defences. With a savage wail the leading Junkers went into a dive from a high altitude. After plunging several hundred metres it started to pull out, and at that instant Loznevoi saw four bombs detach themselves from its fuselage. They swayed as they fell, like drops of some heavy black liquid. But they disappeared from sight almost immediately, and a rising, earsplitting whistle burst into Loznevoi's consciousness. Covering his eyes in terror, he pushed his face into a corner of the foxhole. With his whole body he felt the ground under him shake four times in rapid succession. An earth-rending crash rolled over the countryside.

The bombs fell to Loznevoi's left. Clouds of smoke rose over the positions there. Loznevoi straightened his helmet and looked out of the foxhole. The leading Junkers was roaring by overhead after its pull-out, while the second in the line was just moving into position over the defences. There was a brief moment of quiet. Loznevoi could hardly believe his eyes when he suddenly saw the mouse

in front of him again. She had popped out of her hole as though nothing had happened and was gathering ears. She bustled about gaily, and the thought flashed through Loznevoi's mind that this gay mouse would surely live through the battle, would lay up a big supply of grain in her hole, would pass the winter in comfort, would greet the new spring. . . .

A flood of terror swept over Loznevoi.

He did not see the second plane dive; neither did he see how many bombs it dropped. When the blood-chilling wail of the siren sounded again he whimpered like a child and shrunk down in his foxhole, dazed. A second later, feeling that he had almost been lifted into the air, he cried out and dug his fingers into the earth. The bombs were exploding around the dummy emplacement, and hard little pellets of earth with a charred odour showered down on his helmet and back. A pall of smoke hid everything from view.

Loznevoi went crazy with fear. From that moment on he had only a faint idea of what was happening around him on the field. The Germans were most likely dropping the major share of their load on the sham gun emplacements and infantry trenches, for their bombs were exploding behind the real firing line, many of them in the sector where Loznevoi and his companions were hiding. They bombed in a calm, businesslike way, making seve-

ral runs each and selecting their targets methodically. Crash after crash resounded. Hot blasts swept out to the sides from the places of the explosions. At times it seemed as though the entire groaning and rumbling field were starting to drop into the depths of hell. Here and there sickening black clouds of smoke and dust rose over the field faster than the wind could disperse them.

... Loznevoi's head beat against the crumbling edge of the foxhole as he coughed. He coughed a long time, spitting out earth. When his reason began to return to him, slowly, like the sunrise spreading through a fog, he ceased coughing and, scratching at the earth, pulled himself out of the foxhole. He turned a wild, lacklustre gaze about him. His ears rang as though crickets were chanting inside them, and the ringing made his temples throb and ache. Fresh, jagged ulcerlike shell holes gaped on the surface of the field. Before his eyes a curtain of smoke was fluttering in the wind. A little way from the foxhole, where the mouse had been running around, he saw a chrome leather boot with a spur glistening on its heel.

"That's mine!" he uttered soundlessly.

Loznevoi could not mistake his spurs. But how did the boot ever land outside the foxhole? What was it doing there? After some hesitation he twisted around and looked at his feet. No, his boots were on! And only then did he finally recall that at the

halt the evening before he had exchanged spurs with Lieutenant Khmelko. "But where is he?" Loznevoi cast his eye over the stubble in search of Khmelko's helmet, but a heap of lumpy earth now lay in the place where he had seen it before the bombing. "Why did he throw away his boot?" Loznevoi crawled out of the foxhole and reached for it, and at the same instant he recoiled: out of the torn boot top jutted a white bone. He lay down, pressed his cheek to the earth, wiped his lips and, to bring home stronger the fact that now everything was clear, he said out loud:

"Bombed. . . ."

A heaviness pervaded his entire body. But calm, sober consciousness quickly returned. Never had he wanted so much to live as in those few seconds! And all of a sudden a simple and lucid idea flashed through his mind, an idea in which salvation lay, which granted him life. Before he had time to rejoice at his idea he heard the tramp of feet and Kostya's voice crying, "There he is, there he is!"

Kostya ran up to Loznevoi, kneeled down beside him and gripped his shoulder. Feigning fright, the lieutenant quickly began to push off from the ground with his hands to get up. The look he gave his orderly was dull and uncomprehending. Kostya's mud-spattered face contorted with pain and suddenly aged. Blood was trickling from his left

nostril. Wiping it from his upper lip in a boyish gesture, with his index finger, he shouted in a tearful voice:

"It's me, me! Comrade Battalion Commander, are you wounded?"

Loznevoi waited a second, then shouted in reply: "Eh?"

"Get bruised? Where does it hurt? Where?"

Loznevoi nodded toward the west. "There—yes, they've gone!"

Suddenly Captain Ozerov's tall, bulky figure rose above him. The captain was breathing hard. His tunic collar was open, and his reddish hair was disheveled. In his left hand he held his helmet by the chin strap; with his right he was hurriedly shifting his holster from his stomach to his side.

"This one looks shell-shocked," Kostya said to the captain, holding his finger against his left nostril.

Captain Ozerov quickly knelt down.

"Feel bad? Where does it hurt?"

"No, he's gone stone deaf," Kostya said.

"Damn it, that's rotten!" Ozerov said with disappointment, to no one in particular. Then he jumped to his feet. "Well, escort him to the rear. Make it snappy! And stop snivelling! Where's the commissar of the battalion? Do you know?"

"In one of the companies somewhere. . . ."

"Lead the battalion commander past his CP, understand? Run in and tell them to call up the com-

missar—let him take over. Understand? Make sure you don't forget. And then escort the battalion commander to the rear. Well, that's all!"

The captain turned around, shouted "Hey Petya!" and set out for the defence positions at a run.

XXII

Battalion Three, which was defending the centre, was left without its main officers at the most important moment, just as the battle was beginning. There was no time to feel bad about it, however. Captain Ozerov sensed acutely that now each minute was precious. Possessed by one idea, he ran as fast as he could to the forward edge of the defences, holding his helmet to his chest as he ran.

When he stopped to catch his breath on a small height covered with a clump of stunted young birches, Captain Ozerov at once saw, through the shimmering smoky haze in the air, that soldiers from the sector held by Company Three were in disorderly flight over the field; they were running crouched over, and they dropped frequently to the ground. His first thought was that they were still rushing about in panic from the bombing. But they were all running in his direction, and he realized that something had made them give up the line.

Petya Uralets, who had been following close on the heels of his commander, dashed up to the top of the height and stopped, all winded. Without saying a word Ozerov seized his orderly's tommy gun, raised it over his head and, his face contorted as though by excruciating pain, shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Halt! Halt!"

Bent over double, almost on all fours, one of the soldiers was running straight toward Ozerov without seeing or hearing him. On the slope he fell from exhaustion. He crawled a few metres, working frantically with his arms and legs, then jumped up and, still unaware of Ozerov's presence, dashed straight at him.

Ozerov fired a tommy-gun burst into the air.

"Halt!"

The soldier stopped, threw out his arms and stared wildly at Ozerov. His face was smeared with clay, the front of his tunic was torn, his forehead was covered with blood, and his terror-filled eyes were round and white and unseeing. When the men running far behind and on the sides heard the tommy-gun burst and saw the leading man stop, they began to slow down. Ozerov was trembling all over. He stepped forward and shouted hoarsely:

"Where to, you rat? Running away?"

"Tanks!" the soldier yelled, waving his arms. His

wild white eyes grew still rounder. "Tanks over there!"

Ozerov advanced on him. "Back!"

"Ah-h-h!" the soldier moaned, stepping back. "Forcing me?"

Ozerov raised the tommy gun and fired a long second burst over the soldier's head. The man crumpled to the ground but jumped up at once and started to run back headlong with frightened glances over his shoulder at Ozerov. As though at a command his comrades who had been running behind also turned about and fled back to the line.

Ozerov started down the slope with big strides.

"Ba-a-ack!" he shouted.

Only then, as he walked rapidly after the men, did Ozerov look up into the distance. One after the other dark-grey German tanks were emerging from a fir wood that walled off the horizon and, bouncing on rust and bumps, were spreading out into formation. They were still far away and the roar of their motors came over faintly, like the calm roll of distant thunder.

Now it was all clear: early in the morning the Germans had reconnoitred the defences on the highways; then they had examined the positions from the air, had launched feint attacks on the highways and now, after bombing the centre of the line, were throwing their main forces into action there. In all this could be felt a unified plan, accurate

coordination of all the arms of the service conducting the offensive. The Germans were fighting skilfully. "Well, what of it!" Ozerov thought, trembling with fury. "You'll pay dearly! Dearly! Dearly!"

The soldiers ran to their trenches and Ozerov strode quickly after them. Every once in a while he raised the tommy gun over his head and shouted:

"Forward! Get them with grenades! Burn them out!"

XXIII

As soon as the planes started westward Matvei Yurgin rushed over to the neighbouring trench. Out of it rose Andrei's dull-green helmet.

"Is it over? Have they gone?"

"All over!" Yurgin sat down on the edge of the trench. "Well, how was it?"

"All right. I just sat through it." A smile lit up Andrei's soft, thoughtful face for a second. "Dammit, how they fight! It gets you right in the guts! And when the ground shook I thought it'd shake me clear out of the trench! Come on, climb down here."

Andrei spoke in a somewhat more animated tone than usual. He had not been frightened by the bombing; it had only excited him. That was his first bombing. As yet not once during the retreat had he seriously considered the possibility of

being killed. Nor had he thought about death at the sight of those planes. He still did not know what a frightful thing a bombing was. For that reason—and for that reason alone—he had not been the least bit afraid. In the same way a child fearlessly reaches out his hand to fire before he has learned that it is dangerous.

He had watched the planes go into their dive and the bombs start falling. Deafened by their metallic whistle, he had shrunk quickly into the corner of the trench. Then, looking out, he had marvelled, "All that smoke! Like out of a volcano!" It was Andrei's luck that all the bombs had fallen far behind him, on the mock positions; he had not seen their fiendish destructive force with his own eyes and hence he had experienced no fear whatever, but only excitement.

Yurgin was glad of this.

Andrei and Yurgin had settled themselves on the bottom of the trench facing each other and were animatedly discussing the bombing. They did not notice either the tanks appear on the fringe of the distant wood or men from Company Three run away from the line. Only when a tommy-gun burst sounded on the left and bullets whizzed through the dry autumn air one after the other, as though having a race, did they glance uneasily out of the trench. Company Three men were scurrying over the field back to the line of trenches.

"What are they doing?" Yurgin exclaimed in surprise.

Andrei pulled at his sleeve. "Look over here!"

At the sound of the motors Matvei Yurgin squinted into the distance.

"Tanks!" he said in a rapid whisper. "Those are tanks!"

"How many?"

"The devil knows!" Yurgin stood up over the trench. "Well, Andrei, I'm going! You ready? Your grenades tied together? Your fire bottles?"

"Look, I've got everything. . . ."

"Well—" Yurgin quickly reached out his hand and gripped Andrei's shoulder hard. "You all right? Keep your eyes open, Andrei old boy!"

Then he jumped out of the trench and shouted to his squad:

"Grenades ready! Bottles! No funking! Let them come close!" With each phrase his voice grew stronger. "Hit to kill! No cowardice!"

Andrei had not yet encountered tanks and did not know how difficult and terrifying it was to fight them with the weak hand weapons the soldier carried at his belt. And so when he saw the tanks, again he was not the least afraid. He moved his knapsack to the back wall of the trench so as not to crush his food by accident, and looked out a second time, now more intently. Like huge black buzzing beetles the tanks were crawling out of the

wood one after the other and, lurching on the uneven places, were slowly spreading out over a yellow field. Andrei began to count them, but he got mixed up because they kept appearing on rises and disappearing in hollows as they straightened out into attack formation. "What kind are they?" he wondered. "Medium or light?" Suddenly he decided that he ought to take a drink of water before the battle. While he drank from his canteen he did not remove his gaze from the field on which the tanks had appeared. He started to think about the fact that he was threatened by death. But still he did not feel frightened: curiosity quickly took the upper hand over fear and made him forget about death. He even pulled a few twigs out of the breastwork so that he could see the tanks better. Then he wanted to smoke. He took out his pouch but to his disappointment realized that he would not have time.

"Afterwards," he decided out loud.

Crouching down in the trench, he began to inspect his bundle of grenades. Just then the tanks put up a whine that was echoed by all the surrounding woods. Andrei surmised that they were going into attack in high gear. He straightened up to look and saw that he was right: one tank—the leader—was speeding over a dirt road in a cloud of dust, while the rest, spread out fanwise over a big area, followed behind, nosing into the hollows

and bouncing up on the mounds. The quickly rising roar of their motors and the clang of their treads now rolled over the field like thunder. The earth began to rumble as though it were cast iron. Fifty metres ahead of Andrei's trench something popped twice in succession with a flash of flame and a puff of smoke, and then something began to strike into the earth around him with a hiss.

"Down, you fool!" he heard Yurgin exclaim. "They're shooting!"

"The tanks?"

"Get down!" Yurgin shouted, peeping out.

No sooner had Andrei pressed his cheek to the cool wall of the trench than the battalion's guns opened up from the grove on the left. In a whirl of dust the dark leading tank, with white crosses on its sides, was still speeding straight ahead, cutting across the windings in the road. Flame spurted from the muzzle of its gun at regular intervals. Our excited gun pointers caught it in their sights and fired frequently, but they kept missing. At last a shell glanced off the sloping turret. A split second later another struck the side of the tank. As it emerged from the smoke the tank suddenly swerved sharply at full speed with a clanging noise. It spread a broad, heavy section of one of its treads out over the grass, and, its entire clumsy hulk jerking, turned its rear to the guns. At that moment several more shells must have hit it, for

with a crash that shook the field a thick column of flame spurted up, followed by a cloud of black smoke, like from a huge bonfire.

Andrei looked up out of the trench again but pellets of earth immediately flicked against his cheek and helmet. "Dammit!" he exclaimed, squatting and rubbing his eyes. On the left the guns were barking. All along the line machine guns were chattering hastily. Every now and then a protracted human cry rose amidst the roar of the motors, which rolled over the field more and more threateningly, and the crash of the gunfire and the explosions. Three tanks were already in flames on the field; their smoke was drifting toward the positions. The stifling smells of gunpowder, burning oil and charred iron hit Andrei's nostrils. Yet the other tanks came on and on toward the line.

Earth began to crumble off the wall of the trench. Andrei realized that the tanks were quite near. He stopped rubbing his eyes and, without looking out, snatched up a bottle filled with a yellowish liquid. A rubber band around the neck of the bottle held the fuse—a long wooden splinter smeared with an amber-coloured mixture. Then he pulled a box of matches out of his pocket. He struck the first match three times before he noticed it had no head. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath. "What junk!" When the head of the next match crumbled and the striker wore thin, Andrei

began to get nervous. The earth was trembling and humming with rising intensity, and a hail of German bullets was whizzing over the trench. . . .

Only with the third match did Andrei manage to light the fuse, but by then he no longer felt as calm as he had during the first few minutes of the battle. The fuse began to give off a foul smoke. Andrei quickly stood up in the trench. He glanced out from under the rim of his helmet—and beads of sweat broke out all over his face. There was a tank fifty metres from the trench. It was standing still, with the muzzle of its gun turned to the right, and was firing at the edge of the wood, where a battery was pounding away. But suddenly the whole armoured hulk gave a jerk. Its motor snarled and then broke into a whine. Andrei was deafened, as in a high wind. The tank jerked still harder, as though it were swallowing something, and lumps of earth flew into the air from under its clanking, spinning treads. It looked, Andrei thought, like some enraged monster which wanted to dig itself a lair on that spot.

The bottle was now warm in Andrei's hand. He saw that the fuse had already burned halfway and hurled it, falling forward against the edge of the trench. The bottle described a delicate smoky arc, the glass and liquid sparkling in the sun with the colours of the rainbow, and fell to earth five metres in front of the tank. "Did it fall short?" Andrei

thought with consternation. His broad chest began to expand like a bellows. The tank passed by the bottle, the fuse of which was smoking faintly, and headed straight for his trench. Andrei felt his head swell up instantaneously from its roar and clang. Now he no longer heard anything else of what was happening around him. And he saw nothing before him but the tank. The closer it approached the bigger it grew. Its cannon and machine-gun barrels spewing fire, the huge tank was now crashing forward against a background of sky and clouds, and it seemed to Andrei that behind it were not clouds but puffs of white gas. With a mad force the glistening, grinding treads of the tank were pulling under themselves the entire field, the bushes, Andrei's trench....

Andrei broke into a sweat all over. With a wild, inarticulate shout he seized another bottle, swung his arm back and threw it at the tank. It shattered against the turret, and the yellow liquid ran down the armour, flashing rainbow colours. That same second Andrei threw a third bottle, which broke near the driver-mechanic's observation peephole. There was no flame, however, and only then did Andrei realize that in his haste he had failed to light the fuse. He shrunk down in the trench with a groan.

The tank was very close. A wave of heat and an oppressive smell of burning swept over Andrei.

He grabbed a bundle of grenades and without aiming threw it under the onrushing tank. Then he immediately dropped to the bottom of the trench. He did not hear the explosion. The tank shuddered and was shrouded in smoke for an instant, but it tore ahead with a still louder roar. The left tread crashed over Andrei's trench. The tank then turned sharply to the right, sending a shower of earth and twigs into the trench.

The instant it started forward again, however, a bottle flew out of the next trench, sparkling in the sunlight. It broke near the motor. Liquid fire ran down the armour and into the slits.

With a long shout Yurgin leaped out of his trench, bounded forward and hurled a second bottle. The flames on the motor section flared up higher. Again Yurgin's battle cry rang out over the field.

The tank veered sharply to the right and left several times and then turned back, filling the air with its wail as, with the frantic strength of a living creature, it tried to save its life by shaking off the flames. But the flames had taken a death grip in the slits. The tank swerved this way and that and sprang into the air with savage growls. It flew ahead at a mad speed, bouncing up on rises and nosing into hollows, but the fire had dug its claws into the hulk like a bird of prey and was strangling it, wearing it down, holding it tight....

XXIV

Matvei Yurgin's fighting spirit flared to a high pitch as he rejoiced loudly at his success. The heat of battle had now taken full sway over him and transformed him beyond recognition. His movements were abrupt and jerky. His face changed its expression every second: now it was distorted by intense concentration and fury, now lit up by exultation. He breathed in quick pants, his big white teeth flashing. From under his helmet streams of grimy sweat trickled down his swarthy flaming cheeks. His pupils were dilated, as in the dark, and his bloodshot eyes were terrifying.

His attention focused on the burning tank and its efforts to put out the flames, for a time Matvei Yurgin did not notice what else was happening on the field—in battle a soldier always sees only what is taking place in his immediate proximity, kaleidoscopic pictures which his inflamed gaze usually catches by accident. Only when he saw the tank dive into a ditch, stop short and spread out over itself, like a banner of death, a huge blood-red curtain of smoke-edged flame, did he look around more calmly. He saw shells exploding and heard bullets whistling past, and first of all he remembered about Andrei.

"Andrei!" he shouted, looking for his comrade's trench.

Just then he caught sight of another tank coming over the crest of a rise about a hundred metres ahead and a bit to the right. The tank was moving unevenly: first its rollers, half concealed by the tall dry grass, turned slowly, then they suddenly became solid discs and the treads slithered over them like snakes. Riflemen and machine gunners were firing away at its peephole from the nearby trenches; even in the sunlight quick bullet glints could be seen all over the front of the tank and on its turret. The tank slowed down and started to pound away at the trenches with its gun; it seemed to be sneezing fire and smoke as it worked its way laboriously over the roaring field.

Bending low, Yurgin ran to his trench, where he remembered he had a bundle of grenades. But there was none on the breastwork. "Where has it gone to?" he wondered. "Or did I throw it already?" Looking down he saw Glukhan lying on his side on the bottom of the trench and realized that in his haste he had strayed.

"Glukhan!" he shouted. "What's the matter? What's wrong?" Then he saw a bullet hole in Glukhan's helmet and blood on his tunic collar behind the ear and on his back. "Oh, Glukhan!" Yurgin shouted, himself not knowing why.

He jumped down into the trench to take a better look at his dead soldier. His foot landed on something hard—a bundle of grenades. This remind-

ed him of the tank. He snatched up the grenades and looked out of the trench.

The tank was very near. It was moving ahead slowly to the right of Glukhan's trench; slowly and uncertainly, for molten lead had evidently blocked up the driver-mechanic's observation peephole, and perhaps had wounded him in the eye as well.

Suddenly the figure of a soldier rose in the path of the tank. A thin curtain of smoke concealed him for an instant but then the sun lit him up, and Yurgin saw him walk forward to meet the tank, shouting frenziedly. In his left hand he held a bundle of grenades. His right was torn off up to the elbow; blood was spattering from the tattered sleeve.

Yurgin recognized the soldier. "Martyanov!" He sprang out of the trench, to see Martyanov, hit by a bullet, down on one knee in the grass, yelling and weakly raising the bundle of grenades with his left hand. The tank rolled up and flattened him out—and that same second an air wave threw Yurgin to one side, as might a heavy blow in the ear.

Clutching at the grass, Yurgin jumped up, his features distorted by added fury and by horror at what he had just witnessed, and dashed forward. After crushing Martyanov the tank, which was painted dark-grey, with a dragon on its side, turned

sharply to the right; considerable damage had probably been inflicted on its rollers and treads. Yurgin ran ahead a few metres toward the tank with the bundle of grenades in his outstretched hand. Then he straightened up, threw the grenades blindly and dropped exhausted to the dry grass.

The explosion lifted him off the ground. When he raised his head a second later he saw that the right tread of the tank had sunk into a trench and it had nosed sideways into a rose-brier bush. The tank was jerking, its motor was wheezing, and its turret and gun barrel were turning about, as though it were sniffing its path—but it could not budge. A new explosion resounded on the other side of the machine. A scorching cloud of smoke enveloped Yurgin. When the smoke cleared the figure of a soldier came into sight. Yurgin rushed up to the tank.

"This way!" he shouted. "Come on!"

He quickly clambered up on the tank, and, looking back and waving his arms, again shouted:

"This way!"

The first to run up was Degtyarev, the soldier who had thrown a grenade at the damaged tank from the other side after Yurgin. Without saying a word Yurgin snatched Degtyarev's rifle and madly began to poke the bayonet into the slits in the armour. The bayonet made a crunching sound. Yurgin turned to Degtyarev.

"Sand!" he ordered, more by gestures than words. "Into the shutters!"

Degtyarev picked up a handful of earth from the breastwork the tank had smashed.

"With your helmet! Your helmet!"

Degtyarev scooped up some earth in his helmet and poured it on the hot hood, under which the motor was wheezing fitfully. Just then Umrikhin, all smeared with clay, ran up to the tank, and other men followed from different sides.

"Give it to him!" Yurgin shouted triumphantly.

He jumped over to the front of the tank and brought his rifle butt down on the barrel of the machine gun. The men broke into shouts. Flushed with battle and carried away by their success, they became oblivious of everything else taking place around them and began to finish off the tank with whatever came to hand. They fired into various openings. They stuffed earth into the slits and they beat the gun and machine-gun barrels and the hollow-sounding armour with rocks and their rifles.

XXV

A crash rang out nearby. Captain Ozerov was blinded. A few seconds later, surprised to find himself lying on the ground, he clutched at a wheel of the gun carriage and started to get up. When

he fell his helmet had flown off, and his hair was now matted with earth. There were gunpowder burns all over his face; blood trickled down his unshaven left cheek. His eyes roamed over the battlefield, searching for something.

Petya Uralets groaned. "Wounded?" he asked, running up.

"I won't be wounded! Or killed!" Ozerov's features were distorted with fury, and he shouted as though he were raving drunk. "No, not us! Me? No!" He stood up on his knees. "Over there—what happened over there?"

"Gun number three—"

"Smashed?"

"You're wounded, wounded!" Petya Uralets shouted. "You have to be bandaged—there's blood! Comrade Captain!"

"Am I wounded?"

"In the head! Here!"

"Oh. Well, Petya, bandage me up! And make it snappy!"

Captain Ozerov knelt, holding on to the gun wheel, and submissively let Uralets turn his head from side to side as he dressed the wound. When he had finished, the Captain pushed him away and rose quickly to his feet beside the gun—tall, thickset and black-faced, the bandage around his head like a turban. He had forgotten all about his helmet.

"Shells!" he shouted hoarsely, looking around.

Only one gun was left in the battery. The other three, which had stood in a row to the left, were smashed. Wheels, twisted gun carriages and barrels, shattered crates, dead men, smashed rifles and helmets and bloody tatters of uniforms were strewn over the shell-ploughed earthen gun positions. A little way off, on an untouched spot of the field, lay a sturdy, well-fed artillery horse; it could only twitch its side and jerk its raised leg, but not lift its head. Two soldiers were clumsily hauling a wounded man to the forest. Another was crawling there by himself, dragging his wounded leg. In a nearby trench Ozerov glimpsed moving helmets.

"Hey, you! Hey!" he shouted, holding onto the gun shield. "Aren't we Russians? Shells! Get me some shells, Petya old man!"

Petya Uralets ran off for shells. Three soldiers in helmets and dirty uniforms jumped out of the trench and followed him.

And so the lone gun went into action again. The artillerymen who had accidently escaped death were from various crews but they understood one another at a glance, and each carried out the duty that fell to him quickly and efficiently. And Captain Ozerov, now helping to turn the gun, now passing up shells, now scanning the battlefield, again began to call out:

"Fire! Fire!"

This command was unnecessary, and no one heeded it. But somehow the repetition of this word, the commonest in war, made Captain Ozerov feel good. He shouted it with satisfaction, his whole body quivering—as though he had just learned the word and liked it so much that he was ready to repeat it endlessly:

"Fire! Fire!"

He was so engrossed by the battle that he could think of nothing else. He was in a state of unaware but complete self-abnegation. He did not hear the shell blasts or the whistle of the bullets. He had no time to think about danger or about death, which threatened him every instant. Neither did he have time to think about demonstrating before his subordinates his fearlessness and scorn for death. Each minute of the battle faced him with a multitude of various duties, and these duties, every one of which demanded immediate execution, absorbed his concentrated attention to the full, absorbed all his inner powers.

Eleven tanks were burning on the field; huge trains of smoke drifted from them on an imperceptible current of air. Near the infantry trenches, where many fire bottles had been needlessly broken in the hurry and panic, the grass and stubble were burning out. The air over the battlefield was heavy and smoky. The oppressive smells of gasoline, lubricating oils and the fire-bottle liquid, of

gunpowder and scorched paint and iron overpowered all the smells of the earth, all the freshness of the Indian summer.

The first wave of tanks, which had dealt a ramming blow, was smashed. But now a second and stronger wave was coming on. The tanks advanced steadily over the smoky field, skirting the bonfires of metal, and now the thunder of their motors drowned out all the other sounds of battle.

On the right flank they had already driven a big breach in the battalion's defences. Now, moving deeper into the positions, they were mowing down the madly-fleeing soldiers with machine-gun fire and crushing them under their treads. The entire complement of Battery Two, which stood in the area of the breach, was wiped out.

In the centre of the line tanks were ironing out the infantry trenches with a roar and a rumble. Shells were exploding everywhere. Earth showered down on the field in pellets, as though it were being thrown through a screen, and smoke drifted up from it like dusty refuse. Occasionally the faint cries of wounded men could be heard amid the wail and the roar and the clang.

But neither Captain Ozerov nor any of the artillerymen saw the battlefield. For them the whole battle was concentrated in a small area around their solitary gun.

One of the tanks approached quite close. Captain Ozerov spotted the machine as it was emerging on the crest of a rise, with its treads pointing upward. Its gun was silent.

"Fire!" Ozerov shouted, dropping to one knee beside the gun. "Fire!"

The gun pointer, a small fellow as black from head to foot as a chimney sweep, with sergeant's insignia on his collar, turned the barrel to the right and quickly sighted over it. The gun recoiled sharply once, then again, then a third time, as though it wanted to jump out over its emplacement and throw itself at the tank, which had now come over the rise and was turning the barrel of its gun at it. One of the shells knocked out the tank's track idler and the other rammed into the turret. Abruptly the tank turned about and crawled into a hollow dotted with hazel bushes and buckthorns, its loosened and falling tread making a grinding noise.

"A-a!" Ozerov shouted furiously. "Give it to him! Give it to him!" He began to tug at the gun pointer. "Fire!"

A shell exploded behind them against a fir tree standing by itself near the edge of the wood. The soot-begrimed gun pointer twitched, reached convulsively for the bolt, twitched again and, throwing out his arms, fell on the mount. Another soldier dropped the shell he was carrying, cried out at the top of his voice, and staggered away, clutching at his side.

While Ozerov and Uralets were dragging the dead body of the black-faced gun pointer over the breastwork of the emplacement, the third artilleryman, also a young fellow, but big, with a grimy face and teary eyes, discovered while handing the bolt that a shell fragment had smashed the cover of the firing mechanism and that the hammer spring and the firing pin had flown out. From a distance Ozerov sensed that something had gone wrong with the gun. He rushed over to it and squatted beside the mount.

"Well? What's the matter?"

"See this?" The artilleryman stood up and waved both his hands in a gesture by which he buried the gun and bid farewell to it. "She's finished! Drop her!"

At that moment it first struck Captain Ozerov that the guns for which he had sent runners to the neighbouring battalions would undoubtedly come too late. But again he promptly became engrossed in a job that had to be done, and done without the loss of precious seconds. He suddenly remembered that somewhere near the gun he had seen an axe accidently left over from the night before, when the emplacement had been built.

"Petya, the axe!" he shouted, looking around.

Uralets jumped down into the emplacement and handed him the axe.

"And a nail—give me a nail!"

"Here's a file," suggested the artilleryman grasping the indefatigable captain's intention.

"Load!" Ozerov commanded.

The damaged tank had crawled jerkily past the bushes and was moving farther away along the hollow. Ozerov hastily set the file into the empty slot in the wedge of the bolt and brought the butt of the axe down on it. The gun shuddered. The shell landed in the motor box of the retreating tank, and a curly wave of flame swept over it.

But before Ozerov even had time to rejoice at their success Petya Uralets grabbed him from behind and, shouting something, began to drag him away from the gun. As he stepped back over the mount the captain fell, and when he sprang to his feet he saw a tank only twenty metres away, to his left. It had popped out from behind a little wooded salient and was charging the emplacement. Ozerov wanted to do something, to snatch up something, but it was too late. Roaring and clanging deafeningly the tank was already coming over the breastwork with treads pointed upward.

What followed took only a few brief seconds. Captain Ozerov saw that nothing could be done and backed away, instinctively throwing up his arms to shield himself. At the same instant he felt his hands brush against warm steel. And then by some miracle, not seeing or understanding how, he convulsively caught hold of the tow hook. He was jerked

upward. With its left tread the tank crushed the gun and the artilleryman, who did not have time to jump aside, and then it headed out of the emplacement, dragging the captain along on its hook. Petya Uralets crumpled to the ground, wailing like a child. The tank passed him by and rolled on at top speed.

Captain Ozerov did not understand what had happened to him. He did not know what he was holding on to, yet unconsciously he kept tightening his grip. He strained to keep his head raised, and the dry grass whipped the nape of his neck and his back. His legs dragged along under the belly of the tank. His arms felt as though they were being jerked loose from their sockets. It seemed as if all around were an impenetrable night, and that together with some roaring, fire-breathing hulk he was plunging into a bottomless abyss, and that he was being torn limb from limb....

As it crossed a ditch the tank came down heavily on the other side and Captain Ozerov, losing his hold, slid under the machine and into the bottom of the ditch....

XXVI

Suddenly, with an uneasy feeling, Andrei opened his eyes. On a grey rock close to his head sat an old crow; out of her right wing jutted a twisted feather, its underside glistening white. Beak raised,

she was staring at Andrei with a senile squint, as through spectacles, and all of a sudden her eyes seemed to take on the roundness and deathly lunar colour of an owl's. The crow twitched her lowered wings with cold and stepped forward. Andrei froze in horror at the sound of her claws scraping against the rock. He did not move but gave a moan, and the bird, taking flight, blotted out the sky for an instant with whirring wings.

Andrei laboriously pushed himself up a bit and looked around with swollen, bloodshot eyes. He was lying in a mangled brushwood. Fresh rust-coloured sap was trickling down the stripped alders. Round little full-blown berries glistened on the crushed buckthorn bushes. The old crow swayed on the crown of a young birch, and her beak had a metallic glint in the sun. She had no intention of flying away far. Her gaze was alert and expectant. Andrei began to clutch convulsively at the dry, charred-smelling grass.

"Come to?" Yurgin called from a clump of bushes.

"My head is humming," Andrei replied after a pause.

"Lie still!" Yurgin ordered. "Get your wits knocked out? You look kind of queer . . . ."

They both fell silent again. Each strained his ears, now slightly raising his head, now putting it to the ground. Far away on the flanks, near the

highways, guns were still thundering, but in their own vicinity, on the battalion's line, an unbroken quietness was settling, that special quietness for which the out-of-the-way Rzhev region places are noted. Now and again crows flew by, but the flapping of their wings did not disrupt the silence.

After breaching the central defences the German tanks proceeded straight through the forest to the Vazuza. They were followed by tommy gunners, who killed off the wounded and captured those who had not managed to reach the forest.

With Yurgin's help Andrei had climbed out of his half caved-in trench at the last minute, when the German tommy gunners were close by. Then, hiding in the weeds, they had crawled away to a shrubby hollow. The Germans passed by without noticing them. For a long time Andrei and Yurgin lay motionless in the bushes, holding their breath. The tramping of feet, shrill whistles, bursts of tommy-gun fire and heart-rending cries resounded over the field for about an hour. Many metallic alien voices shouted for a while near the little wood where the battery had stood, and then a large crowd was heard tramping over the meadow. After that motorcycles and trucks bound for the Vazuza clattered for a long time over the dirt road nearby. Finally quietness started to settle over the battalion's sector. A breeze dispersed the smells of charred iron, lubricating oils and gunpowder, and

again the crystal scents of autumn took sway over the battlefield.

Now they had been lying in the brushwood several hours. They could have risen and made their way to the forest a long time ago, but something was wrong with Andrei; at times he seemed to lose consciousness. After lying another half hour Matvei Yurgin's chest began to ache, and he raised himself up from the ground.

"Well, rested?" he asked. "Let's go," he suggested in the same breath.

"Let's wait a while longer," Andrei begged in a whisper.

"Why lie here until night? See how quiet it is? Not a soul around. Now we'll make a dash for the forest, and there—"

"Aren't they in the forest?"

"The Germans? They went through long ago!"

"Comrade Sergeant, let's wait a while."

"Listen here, Andrei old boy," Yurgin said. "Get a grip on yourself and stop it! Didn't I see how you fought that tank? Why are you acting like this now?"

Despite the quietness that had descended over the battlefield Andrei's body was still benumbed with fear. He was afraid not of what awaited him after the rout of the regiment—he had not got around to thinking about that yet. He was terrified by the thought of what he had experienced on the

battlefield, and he still could not believe that it was all over. His head hummed and the whistle and the roar still rang unabating in his ears; he did not believe that it had become quiet all around.

After a while the grass and rose-brier branches began to rustle again as Matvei Yurgin rose to his knees.

"No, Andrei," he said decisively. "I haven't got any more patience. My chest is aching all over. Come on!"

"Where to?" Andrei asked in a hollow voice.

"The forest. Where else?"

"Let's crawl, all right?"

"To hell with crawling! We've done enough of it! Stand up!"

Matvei Yurgin rose to his feet and without looking around began to brush off his tunic and trousers.

"Yes, luck was against us!" he said softly.

Andrei waited a few more seconds and then stood up too. His face was grey, his cheeks were sunken, and from under the rim of his helmet his round eyes looked out with a fixed stare, their clear sparkle and placidity gone.... Shoulders hunched, he looked around hurriedly, like an animal at bay, and asked in an altogether muffled voice:

"Should I take my rifle?"

"Of course! What are you going to fight with? Do you think this is the end of the war? No, brother, it's only the beginning! We'll do plenty of

fighting together yet! One man who's been mauled is worth two who haven't."

They set out along the hollow toward the forest. The entire field was scored with the incisions of tank treads and ploughed by shells and mines, as though a herd of swine had dug it up. There were many scorched, blackened areas. The thin forest they soon entered also bore marked traces of the battle: many trees stood with bullet-gashed trunks and with tops and branches broken off by shell fragments; the bushes had been crushed and trampled by machines and men. Here and there along the way—both in the field and in the forest—Andrei saw dead men. He was afraid to look at them, but he could not help looking: he was seeing the power and the mercilessness of death for the first time. He glanced down at the dead men as he walked along behind Yurgin, and everything those quick glances took in fixed itself in his memory: the way the dead lay, their arms outspread and their bodies twisted by the death agony, their faces, the leaves that had fallen on them....

Inside the forest it was already twilight. They trod lightly over the soft earth and the hummocks overgrown with moss and bilberry plants. In the low places, where dense bluish aspen thickets stood, the tufty sedge was still as firm and fresh as in summer. Among the dampish hummocks grew dark rings of horsetail and yellow flowers which were

still trying to light up the forest twilight. "Yellow flowers mean parting. . . ." Andrei thought absently. Then, also absently, he began to extinguish those modest little yellow lights with his boots.

About two hundred metres inside the forest Andrei noticed another dead man. He was lying with his nose in a clump of bilberries and his arms halfway around the trunk of a young pine.

"Comrade Sergeant!" Andrei stopped Yurgin with a quick whisper. "Wait a minute! Look, that's—"

"Who?"

"Our battalion commander!" Andrei unslung his rifle. "Dammit! Oh, Comrade Senior Lieutenant! Where was he hit? In what place? Lord, he's still warm!"

"Come on," Yurgin said. "What's the use of looking?"

"Wait, Comrade Sergeant. Let's see where he was hit. What a shame! Only yesterday he slept over in our house, and now look at what's happened! But where was he hit?"

Andrei put his hand on Loznevoi's shoulder to turn him face up, but just then a rifle shot resounded through the forest.

"Follow me!" Yurgin shouted, dashing off. "Dammit!"

A little while later, when Yurgin and Andrei had disappeared from sight among the trees, Loz-

nevoi raised his head and cautiously peered out from behind the trunk of the pine with one eye. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath. "He had to come along!" He jumped up and, crouching low, began to run from tree to tree toward the edge of the forest. At the sight of a dead soldier lying on his back between two mossy hummocks he stopped, knelt down and began to pull off the man's shoes. The left shoe came off easily but the right one stuck for some reason. In a hurry to finish the job, Loznevoi seized the back of the shoe and tugged at it so hard that he shifted the body from its place. Suddenly the soldier opened his eyes a slit.

"Water!" he moaned feebly.

Loznevoi dropped the man's foot. The next instant he was already running away, weaving in and out among the trees. After running about a hundred metres he stopped near another soldier, whose awkward pose left no doubt about his being dead. There were clots of blood on his head. Loznevoi felt him warily: yes, this one was undoubtedly dead, for the body was already cold. With furious haste he pulled off the man's belt, tunic, trousers and shoes. Then he gathered it up—a dirty, sun-bleached soldier's uniform smelling of sweat and blood—and ran down into a dark thicket.

There he hurriedly changed. The uniform was too small: the trousers came to his calves, while the sleeves barely covered his elbows. Even in his

haste he noticed that it made him look lanky and long-armed. "The devil!" he swore. "Why did he have to be undersized!" He took the soldier's identification card out of the tunic pocket and repeated to himself the name he now would have to bear. Then he put the card away, carried his own uniform to a soggy spot deeper in the thicket and painstakingly trampled it into the mud.

XXVII

While the German tanks were advancing to the Vazuza after crushing Loznevoi's battalion, all our units were already on the other side of the river. Only refugees were thronging across the bridge. Until the last minute the sappers waited for the uncontrollable stream to end, and hence they did not manage to blow up the bridge. The German tanks dispersed the crowds of refugees and crossed over to the eastern bank of the Vazuza, but there they were compelled to call a halt: on the highways, deep in their rear, fighting was still going on.

At the height of the tank attack on Loznevoi's battalion Major Voloshin, the regiment commander, had had a heart attack. Lying in the ambulance cart he had issued an order to his staff to pick up at once and move into the heart of the forest. A few minutes later General Borodin, who was on the

other side of the Vazuza, had come up to the radio wagon to give the regiment its withdrawal order. Despite all the efforts of the operator, however, Voloshin's station did not respond to the call signals. By then the regiment staff was already on its way into the interior of the forest.

Thus Zhuravsky's and Bolotin's battalions did not receive the withdrawal order. They held out staunchly on the highways, continuing to fight even after they realized that the Germans had breached the regiment's positions in the central sector and had reached the Vazuza. Only after groups of German tommy gunners had moved into the breach and begun to threaten their rear were the battalions forced to give up their positions and withdraw into the woods. The highways were now free, and German troops immediately started to advance along them. After losing almost a whole day they rushed ahead to the Vazuza without combing the woods: they were in a hurry to get to Moscow.

When evening fell the movement of German troops along the highways ceased, and then men from all units of the regiment began to assemble in the woods. Singly and in groups they skirted the area of the bridge and made their way up along the Vazuza, where the woods were thick and dark.

... Matvei Yurgin and Andrei met several other soldiers as they picked their way through the dense

forest, and in the night they merged with quite a large group of men from their own regiment, headed by its staff.

Growing as it went, this group moved noiselessly in single file over a winding path through the utter darkness of the forest. Behind it, jolting over the uncovered tree roots, followed several squeaking wagons and an ambulance cart.

In the lead walked Captain Ozerov.

Bareheaded and in a soldier's padded jacket, he leaned on Petya Uralets' shoulder, wheezing and limping heavily on his left leg. The bandage around his head had turned black from the dust and smoke. His head was splitting as though he had inhaled gas fumes, and the small of his back ached and throbbed. The tank had passed over him in the ditch without touching him. But he fell so hard from the tow hook that his whole body had become limp and lifeless and at first he could not rise to his feet. It was with great difficulty, assisted by Petya Uralets, that he had crawled to the forest and there hidden from the tommy gunners. In the forest he had come upon the staff of the regiment. Now he was walking along with an altogether weak and broken gait. Every time he stubbed his toe upon a root or a fallen tree a shudder went through his whole body and he threw his arms out for support, barely managing to keep on his feet. Now and then he would stop short, clutch at his

back and stand that way a few seconds, grimacing with pain and gritting his teeth.

"Why don't you get into one of the wagons, Comrade Captain?" Petya Uralets suggested at such moments.

"Shut up!" Ozerov would answer, squeezing his orderly's shoulder hard. "Shut up, Petya! I have to walk and walk and walk. I'll loosen up and then everything will be all right...."

As he walked he listened to the men plodding behind him. They were obedient to his will, he felt, and he realized that to rally them around him, these men frightened by the rout of the regiment and by the uncertainty of their position, to force them to follow him farther, overcoming all obstacles, he must walk in the lead that night. When he halted to rest, the entire group silently followed his example; when he stopped short to listen to the nocturnal sounds, everybody stopped. Whenever he whispered a command back down the line, everybody hurried to carry it out. Most of the men did not know who was marching in the lead, but all felt his power over them and they submitted willingly, without a word, because he was leading them where they all wanted to go. He walked on and on, imperceptibly, yet firmly, gaining the great right that is the man's who walks in the lead....

Even in the daytime it was always gloomy in the forest through which they were marching. On

that cloudy night it was as dark as in a cellar. Many of the men had the feeling that they were picking their way through some abandoned slum dwelling, where they elbowed against crooked walls and bumped their heads on various junk hanging from the ceilings. Rarely did they tread on solid earth: it was soft and moist and slimy underfoot.

"Everybody's silent," Andrei thought. "I wonder what they're thinking about." The feeling kept recurring that it was not he who was stumbling against the trees but the trees that were running into him, scratching and whipping his face with their branches and making him lose his way. Also, he had the feeling he was walking not on level ground but down and down all the time—into a realm of oppressive and eternal subterranean darkness.

Again and again this painful impression returned Andrei to those new thoughts about death which had come to him for the first time that day; death, whose cruelty and mercilessness had struck him so on the battlefield. Never since the beginning of the retreat had he so wanted to check the enemy as that morning and the evening before, and never had his hopes that the enemy would be checked, on that last line, been so high. But that had not happened. On the contrary, the Germans had smashed their regiment.

It seemed to Andrei that once his unit was smashed, that meant everything was lost, absolutely every-

thing! . . . He did not—nor could he be expected to—think about the fact that their regiment was only a small part of a huge army, and that the loss of a single regiment could not decide the outcome of the war. He had witnessed the defeat of their regiment, he had been shaken to the depths by the terrible picture of its rout and the triumph of death; and, overwhelmed by all this, that night he thought with heartache only of the fact that now everything was lost.

"Who's leading us?" he asked Yurgin in a whisper.

"Keep moving, don't hold up the column," Yurgin replied grimly. "He's leading us the right way. What more do you want? He's leading us—and a good thing it is, too!"

"But where to? There are Germans all around us!"

"Who said so? It's we who are all around the Germans. The deeper they go into our country the worse it is for them. But we—we're on our own territory! Now walk, and keep on walking!"

After midnight the group emerged into a thinner section of the forest. Everyone sighed with relief. Here the trees, and above them the sky, could be seen. It was a cloudy sky, with only a few small scattered stars shining in it, but it was the sky nonetheless. Under it the men felt lighter at heart; now they breathed easier, and the earth felt firmer

underfoot. Somewhere far ahead, in the direction the group was marching, German planes had dropped flares over the roads, and the night had fled from their dead, ghastly light.

Beyond the stretch of thin forest was the steep bank of the Vazuza. The river glistened faintly, like tar. The eastern shore was lost in the darkness, and this made the river seem broad and deep.

Captain Ozerov sat down on the ground, leaned against a big rough rock and, unhurriedly, in a half-whisper, began to issue commands. Only here did many of the men discover that the deputy regiment commander was leading them. Ozerov's orders were carried out quickly and accurately. Now he was exercising not so much the power invested in him by law as that weightier power which he had obtained over the men that night while walking in the lead.

XXVIII

Volunteer scouts went off to look for a ford across the Vazuza. The rest of the men broke up into little groups and settled down to rest along the bank.

Not far from the bank lay a thick fir tree uprooted during a storm; now it gave off an odour of decay and mould. When it fell the tree had torn up, together with its roots, a big layer of sod, which jutted into the air. Andrei sat down, leaned

his head back on the dried sod, with its intertwining tourniquets of roots, and, closing his eyes, for no particular reason tried to picture the storm that had swept over the forest. "What a tree it tore up!" he reflected, and his thoughts about death filled him with even greater horror than while walking through the dark forest.

Yurgin leaned over him. "You sit here," he said, "and I'll stroll up along the bank and have a talk with the men."

"I'll sit here," Andrei replied in a flat voice.

How long he sat on the uprooted fir tree he did not know: again he fell into that strange state of semiconsciousness he had been in when hiding in the brushwood with Yurgin. Before his mind's eye flashed kaleidoscopic pictures of German tanks, of dead soldiers, of white pigeons circling over his native Olkhovka, bathed in the undying glow of its white birches.... Once he even distinctly heard his father say:

"Come back? But will you?"

He was about to speak to his father when voices, the crackle of twigs and rustle of dry grass sounded nearby.

"Still sitting?" Yurgin asked. "And I ran across a couple of our boys. Two bosom pals! They were trailing along behind us—only just now came up."

"How can a fellow walk with that bean pole!" Semyon Degtyarev said indignantly, feeling out for

the fir in the darkness to sit down on it. "He's a nuisance! He squats behind every bush on the way, the devil! And you have to stand there and wait for him!"

"A fright like that can grip anybody's stomach!" Umrikhin rejoined without rancour. "God forbid I see anything like it again!"

Umrikhin settled himself on the tree trunk next to Andrei. Yurgin sat down too. They all lit up, as is the custom when friends meet. For a moment Andrei had the feeling that nothing had changed in their lives, that they were now on an ordinary halt. But then he remembered about Martyanov, Volnykh and Glukhan.

"Is this our whole squad now?" he asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

Umrikhin sighed. "Looks that way. All the rest must have been killed. It's a good thing we got out of it ourselves. . . ."

"How did you get out?" Yurgin asked.

"Better don't ask, Comrade Sergeant!" Umrikhin replied. "Now I can't even remember how we got out of that hell. We had a time of it, all right! I wonder how the Lord ever managed to protect me. They were mowing us down right and left! It was a plain miracle I got away on my own two feet!"

"But you fought all right," Yurgin said. "You didn't seem to be afraid. When we were finishing off that tank, for instance—"

"Tank? Which tank?"

"You know—the one Semyon and I stopped."

"And I—was I there too?"

"Forgotten how you whammed that machine-gun barrel with a rock?"

"Me?"

"Of course! And how you knocked out the tank driver?"

"Me? Hmm!" Umrikhin squirmed with satisfaction in the darkness. "See how I fought, huh?" he exclaimed with unaffected surprise. Then he added proudly: "Naturally, I did my bit! You can't expect a man to remember everything in a mess like that!"

On the river down below someone called out softly:

"Go ahead, don't be afraid!"

The group had begun to cross the river.

Yurgin rose. "Let's go," he said.

They all stood up slowly, resting their hands against the tree trunk or the ground for support; the few minutes of rest had made their weary bodies relaxed and sluggish.

Captain Ozerov was sitting under a cape-tent spread out next to a rock, examining his map with a flashlight and marking out their further route. Tseluiko, the regiment commander's adjutant, ran up to him.

"Comrade Captain, our major has died," he said in a hollow voice.

Ozerov rose and laboriously started up the steep bank, accompanied by Tseluiko.

"It happened just now," the adjutant said.

The ambulance cart was standing on the path under a fir tree. Captain Ozerov bent over it and turned on his flashlight. Major Voloshin was sitting back in a corner of the cart as though dozing. All night long he had ridden in that position, twitching spasmodically and clutching at his heart. Forgetting himself, Ozerov tugged gently at the major's coat lapel.

"Comrade Major!" he whispered. "Ivan Andreyevich."

"He's dead!" a voice exclaimed knowingly from behind the wagon.

Ozerov took the major's hand. He felt the chill of death spreading through it. He stood there for a while, his mind a complete blank.

A crowd had already gathered around the cart. Anxious voices arose.

"Our major?"

"Dammit!"

"And in a fix like this. . . ."

"A nasty business!"

"The regiment's smashed, and the major is. . . ."

Ozerov had stepped away from the cart and was listening: no sounds of splashing were coming

from the river. He whirled around to the crowd of soldiers.

"Who said the regiment is smashed?" he uttered in a rage. "Who said it?" he repeated, breathing heavily.

He unbuttoned his padded jacket and with a single sweep unfurled over his head a dark rectangle of cloth trimmed with tassels.

"Here is the regimental banner!" he exclaimed, almost shouting—and a voice far away across the river tried to repeat his words. "As long as it is with us the regiment is alive! Do you hear? We swore fidelity to this banner. Who dares to let it fall? Who dares to give it to the enemy to defile? When did Russian soldiers ever drop their battle standard? We will carry it through even if we have to wade up to our knees in blood!"

... At the edge of the bluff Tseluiko caught up with Ozerov.

"Comrade Captain, what about the major?"

"Bury him!"

Matvei Yurgin volunteered for the job. He chose a place for the grave and called his men over to help him. Soon their spades were ringing busily against the stony soil. They all worked in gloomy silence, as though they were digging a last resting place not for the commander of the regiment but for themselves. The only one who spoke up during all the time they dug was Umrikhin.

"Yes, some business," he said slowly, dragging out the syllables.

The rest of the group started to cross the river. The crackling of willow bushes and the crunch of pebbles could be heard as the carts rolled along and the men groped their way down the bluff. From the sandbank, where there was a good ford, came the sound of men talking in muffled voices and the lapping of the pitch-black water.

When Ozerov reached the eastern bank he began to direct the crossing himself. He kept hurrying the men. Every once in a while he switched on his flashlight for an instant, and its beam broke up into spangles on the rippling surface of the rapids.

"Everybody here now?" he asked when the last group of soldiers, who had buried Major Voloshin, had crossed.

The men looked around at one another.

"Everybody!"

"We're off!"

But here Matvei Yurgin stepped forward.

"Wait—one man is missing!"

"Who is that?"

"One of my men. But where is he? Where has he gone to? Why, he was following behind us!" Yurgin squatted to get a better view of the river. "Andrei! Andrei!" he called anxiously. "Where are you?"

Ozerov stopped him. "Don't shout. Does he come from these parts?"

"Yes."

"Then everything is clear! Let's go!"

"Damn! Where can he be?"

The group started away from the river, crunching over the pebbles....

XXIX

Andrei was to remember that night as long as he lived.

When his comrades began to cross the river he fell behind and paused on the bank. As he took off his shoes he gazed at the river—and all of a sudden he felt as though someone had run a currycomb down his spine. The rapids that rushed by in the utter darkness, shaking over the sandbank the stars which fell from the sky, divided the world into two. The world on his own side was now terrifying, but still it was a world Andrei knew through and through; the world on the other side was enigmatic, filled with a rare and mysterious darkness, in which unearthly lights flickered. Now the Vazuza was a barrier dividing into two not only the world but his life as well. What awaited him on the other side of this river? Andrei imagined that behind him he could again distinctly hear his father's voice:

"Come back? But will you?"

Andrei did not intend to fall behind the group: at heart he was already a soldier. He was only afraid of what would happen to him on the other side of the river. When Matvei Yurgin called his name he was fumbling so nervously with his shoes and his puttees that he did not even hear him. But he did hear the crunch of pebbles, the crackle of twigs, and then Ozerov's sharp voice—and suddenly the thought that he was alone filled him with terror. He straightened up and sprang into the tarry waters of the Vazuza. He waded along quickly, puffing. In the middle he stumbled over a rock and fell forward on his chest. For an instant he was deafened by the splash. Regaining his feet, he began to hurry still more, and he lost his way. He veered off sharply to the left, where the river was deep and still....

At the sound of loud splashing on the river Matvei Yurgin quickly turned on the steep bank.

"Andrei, is that you?" he shouted.

Andrei somehow managed to wade ashore. Without answering Yurgin's call he started to climb up the bank, catching at the willow bushes. When he reached the top his broad chest heaved, and he was wheezing. Water dripped from his clothing.

"What are you shouting about?" he said wearily after taking a few deep breaths.

"What about? Why did you fall behind?"

Andrei shook himself. "What's the difference?"

he replied, suppressing a shiver. "I'm not a baby—I won't get lost. Dammit, I lost a shoe!"

A knot of men formed around Andrei.

"A shoe? That's bad!"

"How did you lose it?"

"I almost landed in water over my head," Andrei explained in the same weary voice. "Near the shore. Is it deep there! I just about managed to get out. See how wet I am? And I'm real cold!"

Ozerov came up. He recognized Andrei the instant he lit up his face with the flashlight.

"Ah, so it's you?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

"Are you the last to cross?"

"Yes, I'm the last."

Captain Ozerov obviously considered it very important to know that all the men who had reached the river in his group had crossed it.

"Well, that's all, that's all," he said in embarrassment, just as if he and Andrei had had a quarrel and were now reconciled. "Well, everything is all right. We have to be moving. Wait a minute—have you lost a shoe?"

"I'll get along without it," Andrei said, also in embarrassment.

"It's a pity just the same," Ozerov said. "Now we have to take good care of whatever we have, because we haven't any more. What shall we do? Your foot will get cold, won't it?"

"It will," Yurgin said. "And he's all wet besides. Look at him!"

"Wet? Then you take off your clothes, brother!" Ozerov ordered. "Comrades," he said addressing the men, "who can spare some clothes?"

The men quickly handed Andrei various articles of clothing. But there was no extra footwear, and he had to wrap foot cloths and a strip of canvas from a cape-tent around his left foot. After changing into dry clothes Andrei soon warmed up. Never before had it felt so good to be with his fellow soldiers. "They're all like brothers," he thought, moved. "Like one big family." As he marched away from the Vazuza he rejoiced more and more in his warmth and in the happy feeling that he was in the company of men who were like blood brothers of his.

And now it struck Andrei that although their regiment had suffered big losses it was still alive. He was so overjoyed by this thought that the lost feeling which had been tormenting him on the way to the river quickly vanished. Marching in the crowd of fellow soldiers, he no longer recalled the pictures of rout and death and did not think of what awaited him ahead, beyond the endless night, lit up here and there by ghostly lights. He walked east, thinking about life.

PART TWO

I

The birds were abandoning their nesting places. Autumn, as it passed over forest, field and swamp, ousted them and drove them relentlessly to alien parts without even a chance to rest on the way. The melancholy calls of cranes resounded in the cold upper reaches of the air. Old drakes flew over the lake waters with anxious cries, rallying and inspecting their flocks. High above the autumn earth black clouds of starlings wheeled in the wind.

In Olkhovka the bombing operation near the Vazuza was heard clearly. Later the muffled rumble of gunfire came over from time to time. Erofei

Kuzmich knew that the Germans had advanced along the highways, passing the village by, and he instantly realized that a battle had broken out not far from the river. Time and again he came out on the steps and stared darkly and intently at the eastern horizon. His face hardened as bitter thoughts ran through his mind. Once, noticing that the rest of the family had gathered behind him, he drew a deep sigh and waved his hand hopelessly.

"He's done for!" he said, and everybody understood that he meant Andrei.

The old man's eyes lost their lustre.

The house became as quiet as a graveyard. The members of the family sat by themselves in the corners or wandered about silently, unable to take up any work. Each stole out on the steps in secret from the others and gazed with anguish at the east.

Marika bore up better than everybody else in the house, though she suffered the most. She lived through that day—a day filled with the rustle of falling leaves—listening apprehensively to the voice of her heart.

Late in the afternoon Erofei Kuzmich realized with a start that the hole under the mountain ash in which he had hidden the grain and valuables the day before had to be concealed reliably from the eyes of strangers.

"Sorrow is sorrow but there's a job to be done,"

he said. "The Germans may be here before we know it. Let's go and cover up the hole."

Alevtina Vassilievna, whose strength had completely failed her after seeing Andrei off, was sitting in the scullery, leaning against the window frame. "All right, go ahead," she whispered without moving her weary, apathetic gaze from the hazy band of woods in the distance.

"Come on!" Erofei Kuzmich said, turning to Marika, who had just appeared in the doorway of the best room. "You too, Vasyatka. When we've covered it up I'll feel easier at heart."

They went out into the vegetable garden. In the corner of the garden, behind the shed, three cartloads of rye straw which he had earned for kolkhoz work had been hastily piled. With this they decided to cover over the hole. Erofei Kuzmich and Marika carried big bunches of straw on pitchforks to a frame over the hole, while Vasyatka raked them from the pitchforks, skilfully spread out the straw and trampled it down. The stack under Vasyatka rose higher and higher, and after they had been working half an hour he began to reach clusters of crimson berries from the top branches of the tree.

Vasyatka was a keen boy: he saw how worried Marika was about his elder brother. Doubly sorry—for his brother and for Marika—he kept trying to console her as best he could.

"Marika, just look at these berries," he said, holding up a bunch of twigs with big clusters which he had just picked. "Want them?"

"Throw them over, Vasyatka."

"I'll get you the best ones!" the boy exclaimed happily. "Look!"

"Hey you there!" Erofei Kuzmich yelled at Vasyatka from the shed. "What are you shouting about? Do you want people to see us? And what are you spoiling the tree for? Stop breaking the branches!"

"Squeak away, you squeaker!" Vasyatka whispered with a hostile glance at his father. "Catch them, Marika! My, what berries!"

Marika caught the large, heavy twig thickly hung with clusters of berries. The instant she looked at it she recalled a sunny spring day soon after her wedding when she had come out to work in the vegetable garden and had stood with Andrei under that mountain ash. Then a myriad of frothy white blossoms had fluttered overhead. That seemed just such a short while ago.... Yet the mountain ash had not only stopped blossoming but had already produced these rich red clusters of berries.

Erofei Kuzmich came up.

"Marika, why are you standing there doing nothing? First finish and then you can play around!"

Marika made no reply. She thrust her pitchfork into a heap of straw and tried to lift it, but could not. Her soft warm lips parted and turned a deep red. She shook her head, sending her kerchief down to her shoulders. Then, bending her slender girlish waist, she made another attempt to lift the straw, but again she was not equal to it.

"I can't!" she said barely audibly. She threw down the pitchfork and stepped over to the mountain ash. "It will pass in a minute. . . ."

"Predicting?"

Marika turned her head. "Who?"

"Your heart—what else! Only it's too late!"

"You leave me alone now, Pa," Marika responded, holding on to the trunk of the mountain ash. "Don't make me do something I'll be sorry for. What it predicts is none of your business."

Vasyatka could hardly hold back his tears as he listened to this exchange of words. But all of a sudden he shook a branch of the tree and shouted:

"Pa, look, they're coming!"

The pitchfork in Erofei Kuzmich's hands trembled.

"The Germans?"

"No, women! Look like ours, maybe. Over there, over there!"

Erofei Kuzmich flared up. "Damned brat! What do you mean by frightening me, you shockheaded devil? Why didn't you say so right off? You

need a couple of pokes with this pitchfork to teach you a lesson! Phew! I even went all cold inside!"

A small train of carts was moving up the hill toward the village from the east. Behind the carts walked weary, dejected women loaded down with bundles, and children who in the past two days had grown haggard and matured. Glancing up at their native village, now placid under the birches, they exchanged remarks in hollow voices:

"We'll see bitter times here now!"

"Oh, God forbid!"

"Get your noose ready beforehand!"

When the file came to a level with the Lopukhov vegetable garden a woman with a whip, wearing battered boots and a shabby man's jacket tightly pulled in at the waist by a coloured belt, turned off toward the fence.

"Hey, kinsman!" she sang out. "The Germans not here yet?"

Marika dashed over to the fence. "Mama! Mama dear!"

After waiting a while for the tears to subside Erofei Kuzmich went over to the fence too. Marika was standing near the cart, still hugging her younger sister, Faya, a swarthy girl with black eyes like her own, who was just entering upon adolescence.

Kinswoman Anfissa Markovna, a tall, well-built woman of about fifty with a vivacious face and dark eyes that still held a youthful sparkle, hushed her daughters and then called out:

"Drive on, women! What have you stopped for?"

The women skirted her cart and drove into the village. Anfissa Markovna turned to the fence.

"So they haven't been here yet, kinsman?" she asked again after greeting Erofei Kuzmich.

"Not yet, thank God!"

"All we could think about on the way was suppose the Germans are in the village already when we reach it. They'll tear us to shreds, we were thinking."

"They shouldn't, kinswoman. What have women got to do with it?"

"Oh, kinsman! They don't care!"

Erofei Kuzmich lit a cigarette. "Where've you come back from?" he asked.

"From Black Spring."

"So the road was blocked from there on?"

"We couldn't go any farther, kinsman."

"Yes, those soldiers of ours ran through here fast!" Erofei Kuzmich let the smoke out through his left nostril. "Left the village without doing any fighting."

"Do you call that running, kinsman?" Anfissa Markovna said, looking past Erofei Kuzmich.

"Wait till the Germans start to run—then you'll see some running! Way faster than our soldiers! You just won't believe your eyes, kinsman. You know, if uninvited you come, black and blue you leave!"

"Of course, if our army gets the strength. . . ."

"It will!" Anfissa Markovna hit the top fence rail so hard with the handle of her whip that Erofei Kuzmich started. "In his own nest, kinsman, even a crow will claw anyone's eyes out. Did you ever hear that?" Now that she was worked up her face appeared younger. "No, they won't find our bread to their liking! It'll upset their stomachs!"

About the battle near the Vazuza Anfissa Markovna knew practically nothing. She talked about Andrei for a while and then got ready to drive on home. Erofei Kuzmich bid her an amicable goodbye. "Look in on us when you have the time, kinswoman!"

Anfissa Markovna returned the invitation. "You drop in too, kinsman."

"Mama, I'll come over tomorrow," Marika said after parting with her sister.

"Do, daughter, do. Well, we're off!"

Erofei Kuzmich stood a minute longer at the rail, looking at Anfissa Markovna. She took up the reins like a man, whipped the lean horse across the back and, when it started up the slope, set out alongside the cart with big strides. Erofei Kuzmich wagged his head.

"A strong woman!" he said in an envious, and, it seemed to Marika, perturbed tone. "No matter which way life throws a woman like her she'll always land on her feet, like a cat. And she's probably got a cat's eyesight too: good in the daytime and still better at night."

"What's bad about that?" Marika asked, climbing up on the fence.

"She's that sort!" her father-in-law replied evasively.

At first sight of the returning women Marika had been frightened because her mother had not succeeded in fleeing from the Germans, but now she was glad her mother had not left. Now she knew that there was someone in the village who would always help her if anything went wrong. This made her feel better, and when she resumed work she even forgot about her worries for a while. Erofei Kuzmich, on the contrary, became noticeably depressed after seeing his kinswoman, and he worked on in silence. Only when the stack was finished and slanting poles had been set up around it as protection against the wind, did he speak.

"The valuables are safely hidden," he said moodily. "But where to hide my soul for the time being? It's a small enough thing, yet there's nowhere to hide it. And it would be good to."

All evening long refugees kept returning. The village became more populated, but it still seemed

just as deserted as it had been the previous two days: everyone was hiding, fearfully awaiting the arrival of the foreigners.

After nightfall Erofei Kuzmich walked around his farmyard three times without stopping. As he walked, holding onto the fence, stumbling in holes in the dark and pushing his way through the withered but still firm burdock, he kept whispering. now to himself, now out loud, breathing heavily:

"...Against the enemy, come he on horse or foot... and also against plague and famine... against fire and destruction... and the Evil Eye...."

When he had finished the exorcism he went into the storeroom with a little lamp and searched out a pale fleshy stalk with scanty underdeveloped leaves, called Peter's Cross, which he had picked and been saving since summer. He wrapped it in a cloth and hung it over the outside door for good luck to the house.

II

After the dense birch wood the road came out to a small stream. The cart rattled over the little wooden bridge. From here it was three kilometres to Olkhovka; had it been daytime, the village on its spacious and picturesque hill would have come into view. But the earth was shrouded in utter darkness. Not a single light was visible in Olkhovka.

When the cart sank into a rut just on the other side of the bridge, Stepan Boyarkin prodded Serga Hakhai, the clerk of the Olkhovka store, who was driving.

"Stop," he said with a sigh. "This is enough."

Another cart rattled onto the bridge. Then it also stopped. Four men jumped down from it almost simultaneously and approached Stepan Boyarkin from both sides. He was bending over near the back wheel, feeling his leg.

"Hurt?"

"No," Boyarkin whispered. "It's gone numb from sitting on it."

"That's not so, Stepan!"

Boyarkin straightened up. "Well, there's no need to drive on to Olkhovka," he said. "Who knows? Maybe the Germans are there already. No use getting killed just like that. From here you take that track over there." He motioned to the right. "And then follow the fringe of the woods. You know the way, Serga?"

"I do," Hakhai answered out of the darkness.

"And wait for me at Elk Forest. I'll be there by daybreak."

"Will you step in home?"

"They're not expecting me at home. Stepan Boyarkin drove on toward Moscow. I'll just handle the necessary business."

Boyarkin rummaged about inside the cart.

"A rifle?" Serga asked.

"What for now? Where's my stick?"

"Here, take it."

"See you don't lose my boot. Better watch out if you do!"

"Ha!" Serga gave a mirthless chuckle. "You just see you bring your legs back. Taking care of boots is easy."

"That's right, Stepan. You be careful there," one of the others advised.

Before setting out Boyarkin looked about him.

"What a night!" he sighed. "It's dropped over our whole lives now. Pitch black! And cold.... We have to realize that. With all our hearts!"

Despite the cold Boyarkin flung open his jacket. He set out for Olkhovka, limping on his bast-shod left foot and feeling his way in the dark with his stick.

On the hillside just outside the village he sat down to rest on a roadside rock which he had known since childhood. From his place on the slope he could see, far ahead on both sides of the highways, and in the east, where the war had rolled on, the fitful gleams of big fires beyond the forests. Above his native village a few scattered stars shone faintly in the dull sky; the entire countryside was enveloped in an ominous silence.

Stepan Boyarkin had come to see a man—Osip Mikhailovich, the kolkhoz steward. Osip Mikhailo-

vich lived in the centre of the village, however, and getting to his house was dangerous. "Where should I step in first?" Boyarkin pondered, mentally listing his fellow villagers. He had told all the kolkhoz people who were with him during the strafing and then had returned home that he would make his way east no matter what happened. By this time all Olkhovka knew it, and Boyarkin wanted the rumour kept alive as long as he needed it. "What's the use of guessing! I'll go to the Lopukhovs," Boyarkin decided. "I'll find out the situation and then see what to do."

He rose from the rock, crossed the road, and, tapping cautiously with his stick, made for the Lopukhov vegetable garden. In the dark he bumped into the fence. Only as he was climbing over it did he remember that the Lopukhovs had the most vicious dog in the village. It would raise a row that would set all the Olkhovka dogs barking. Without making a noise he climbed down from the fence. He started to go over the kolkhoz people in his mind again and naturally struck upon a relative of the Lopukhovs—the widow Anfissa Markovna. She was a rank-and-file kolkhoz member and a firm, honest woman who could be fully relied upon. Besides, it was easy to reach her house, which stood near the southern edge of the village.

Half an hour later Stepan Boyarkin was in Anfissa Markovna's house. She was not even sur-

prised by his return to the village. She curtained the windows in the dark, lit a lamp and, surveying Boyarkin, remarked:

"Why do you walk around like that? Better to put on two bast shoes, isn't it?"

"I even picked this one up accidentally."

"I have a spare pair. Bring them out?"

"Afterwards. Now we have to call Osip."

Boyarkin had no sooner finished his hastily-served supper than Anfissa Markovna came in with Osip Mikhailovich, an elderly man with a grizzled moustache and a stern, soldierly air. During the Civil War he was wounded in the leg by a shell splinter, and he had been using a heavy birch stick ever since. He greeted Boyarkin and then nodded at the stick leaning against the wall.

"They say you're hurt. Do you limp?"

Boyarkin laughed it off. "You're not the only one who can limp."

Before long the conversation naturally turned to the topic Boyarkin had come to discuss. Carefully gathering up the crumbs from the table, he threw them into his mouth and started on the next slice of fragrant rye bread.

"This year's?"

"We milled it together," Anfissa Markovna said.

"It's good bread!"

"Don't know if you'll eat any more like it now," Osip Mikhailovich said, laying his birch stick be-

side his outstretched stiff right leg. "There's a rumour that the mill has been damaged. And what kind of bread can you get from flour ground in a mortar?"

Boyarkin pointed to the partition with his spoon. "Is Faya asleep?"

"Drums wouldn't even wake her," Anfissa Markovna assured him.

Boyarkin leaned over his cup. "How much have we threshed?"

"I'd have to look that up." the steward replied. "In the old granary there's not much left for delivery to the state, and in the new one there's seed—just the amount planned, even a bit extra. . . ."

"Is there much state grain?"

"A ton and a half."

"Well, you'll deliver it to the state."

Osip Mikhailovich raised his stern, furrowed face with its bushy grey moustache.

"To the state? But how—where?"

"Where I tell you. What—haven't we got a state? You'll deliver it one of these days, or rather, nights. And you'll turn it over to Serga Hakhai. I'll tell you later where to take it. And besides, I'll send men to help you with the job. It has to be done secretly."

The steward understood. "All right, Stepan," he agreed.

Boyarkin finished his supper in silence. Then he rolled a cigarette and lit it from the lamp. The dim light accentuated his thinness and pallor. But his big, bright, hazel eyes burned with unwonted vitality and energy.

"What about the seed?" Osip Mikhailovich asked.

Boyarkin reflected a long time, puffing on his cigarette. Selected grain, the very best, had been set aside for seed. If the Germans came down on them it was lost. On the other hand, he did not want to distribute it. All the kolkhoz members' prospects for the spring were associated with that grain. If it were distributed many of them would take it to mean that the chiefs themselves did not believe the army would return soon or that the kolkhoz would be able to sow in the spring.

"Hide it!" he said at last in a decisive tone.

"How?"

"Figure it out. You're not a little boy. But do it so that all the kolkhoz people know the grain is untouched and safely hidden away till spring."

Somewhere in the village a dog began to bark. Stepan Boyarkin quickly turned to the window, thrust his head behind the coloured blanket and stared into the darkness for a few seconds. Again the barking sounded. Boyarkin covered the window.

"That's our dog!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up with a faint smile.

"Who's she barking at?" Anfissa Markovna asked anxiously.

"Nobody in particular. Or maybe she's calling me."

Boyarkin leaned his elbows heavily upon the table.

"Well, so there's nobody to thresh the stacks, and no time to do it. Right?"

"How can we?" Osip Mikhailovich said. "Let them stand."

"The grain may spoil," Anfissa Markovna said. "We stacked it in a hurry. If it rains it'll rot."

"It won't rot," Osip Mikhailovich assured them.

Boyarkin leaned back against the wall and said firmly:

"It doesn't matter. Burn them!"

"The stacks?"

"Burn them!" Boyarkin repeated. "And as soon as you can. You won't have time to take them apart, and when the Germans come they'll make you thresh them, and then they'll take the grain away or else feed it to their horses. But we must not give them a single kernel. Burn the stacks!"

Anfissa Markovna walked over to the tall stove and leaned her head against it. Covering her eyes with her hands, she said through tears:

"All that grain! How much work we put into it!"

"I know! We picked up practically every single ear."

"That's a fact—every single ear. The children went over the fields with baskets. . . ."

"I know. Just the same—burn it!"

Osip Mikhailovich's moustache began to quiver. "No, Stepan! If you make me set fire to my house I'll do it right now. But, Stepan, I can't touch the kolkhoz grain!"

"Forgotten what was said?"

"By whom?"

"By Comrade Stalin, who else!"

"I realize everything," Osip Mikhailovich replied after a slight pause. "The whole situation. But I can't do it, Stepan. My heart isn't strong enough. If I put a torch to it I'll jump into the fire myself. No, you can kill me, Stepan, but I can't touch the kolkhoz grain! All that wealth!"

"You're weak!"

Boyarkin looked at Anfissa Markovna. "What about you?"

"I'll set it on fire," she replied in a barely audible voice.

It was hard on Stepan Boyarkin too. A heavy, choking weight bore down on his chest. He rose from the bench and stood near the window, running his long, lean fingers over the blanket covering it. Then suddenly he wheeled around, his face changed.

"I also thought I could never lift my hand. . . ." he said, his eyes flashing. "But I tried—and I did! Now the times are different! Now there's other work for our hands. And we have yet to show how strong they are!"

Osip Mikhailovich and Anfissa Markovna stared at the kolkhoz chairman in surprise. No, this was a totally different Stepan Boyarkin, totally different from the man Olkhovka had known before. . . .

III

Only a handful of men were left in Olkhovka. All the able-bodied men of service age had long since been mobilized for army service. Rumour had it that some of the men with physical disqualification cards who had started out earlier had managed to make their way through toward Moscow. About the others nothing was known. In almost all the houses with unboarded windows women had taken over the reins of management. About the men remaining in the village the women joked bitterly:

"Call them men? They're nothing but wrecks!"

"Yes, what's the use of talking about it!"

. . . The following day Marika visited her mother, as she had promised. She found a noisy gathering of women in the house. Here were Lukeria Boyarkina, the kolkhoz chairman's wife, with her

baby; Ulyana Shutyaeva, with eyes swollen from crying over her daughter, who was killed during the strafing; the young soldier's wife Panya Goryunova, and several others from the southern end of the village. In the middle of the conversation a youngster tapped on the window and flattened his stubby nose against the pane.

"They're leading prisoners!" he shouted. "Ours!"

An instant hush fell over the room.

Anfissa Markovna turned to the window. "What do you mean, ours?"

"You know, Russians!"

"The Germans?!"

"Who else? There they come!"

The women all started to talk at once.

"Good gracious, what should we do?"

"I hope nothing happens!"

"We've got to run away and hide, women!"

"What are you wailing about?" Anfissa Markovna said sharply. "Come on, women!" she ordered. "Quick!"

"Where to? There?"

"Let's go and look!"

A column of prisoners was marching down the main street in a cloud of dust. It did not stop until it reached the well under the willows at the western end of the village. The German in the unfamiliar greenish-grey army coat marching at the head of the column shouted something in a birdlike

voice and unslung the burnished tommy gun hanging at his chest. The first two prisoners walked up to the well. The bucket clattered. Whispers passed through the crowd of frightened women and children who had gathered near the outlying houses of the village.

"Women, they're going to give them a drink!"

"Those Germans, just look at them!"

"What shifty eyes they have! Like animals!"

"Lord, how many prisoners!"

"Any from our village?"

"Goodness, what long-legged creatures they are!"

"Not so loud!"

The sun was dropping toward the west. A faint thread of smoke curled above the dark and silent forest in the distance: it marked the passing of a train from Vyazma to Rzhev. The prisoners were probably being driven to the nearest station, on the other side of Elk Forest.

One of the prisoners, a tall man with piercing eyes and a dark stubble on his lean cheeks, pulled up the bucket, set it on the edge of the well and greedily put his lips to it. He drank in noisy gulps, his eyes bulging frenziedly. The cold water made his throat contract, and he tore himself away from the bucket, gasping for breath. But he did not step away from the well. When the next prisoner, a blond young fellow with a bruised and discoloured face, had drunk his fill he took the bucket again and

squatted on his haunches. Noticing this, one of the guards emitted a birdlike squeak and hit him on the shoulder with his tommy gun. The prisoner with the piercing eyes fell over. Fearing another blow for having fallen, he rose hastily to his feet. The German waved him to the other side of the well with his tommy gun.

"*Weiter*!"

"They're hitting them, the beasts!" Lukeria Boyarkina exclaimed.

Her companions hushed her. "Not so loud, silly!"

"Women!" Anfissa Markovna commanded, casting a stern glance around her. "Get bread and food! And be quick about it!"

The women scurried away to their homes.

The crane squeaked and the bucket clattered. The column of prisoners moved past the well, at which the leading guard stood with a tommy gun, his gooseneck outstretched and his lips compressed as if over toothless gums. Along the sides of the column stood six tall ungainly Germans—all the same height, as though picked especially—in long, strange-coloured army coats.

"*Vorwärts*!" they shouted, prodding the prisoners along with their tommy guns.

Marika was the first to return, with a loaf of bread.

"Give it here," Anfissa Markovna demanded.

"Mama, let me—"

"Give it here!"

Just then a commotion broke out at the rear of the column. All the way one of the prisoners, a tall, thin man, had barely managed to trail along behind, and at the halt his legs had given out completely. His comrades had been helping him keep on his feet, but now, in moving forward, they had relaxed their attention for a moment and he had crumpled lifelessly to the ground. Raising their voices, his comrades stooped to pick him up. With shouts three of the Germans rushed up to the knot of prisoners who had broken ranks and began to separate them, wielding their tommy guns furiously. The prisoners went to their places. The Germans crowded around the fallen man and began to shower kicks on him and tug at his arms and tunic to set him on his feet. The prisoner himself strained to get up, but they prevented him with their kicking and tugging.

"Mama, wait," Marika said, frightened.

"That's all right, daughter, I'll go."

Anfissa Markovna strode boldly to the rear of the column.

"Hey, you!" she shouted.

The Germans released the prisoner and looked around. Not understanding why the woman was approaching, one of them shouted at her threateningly.

Involuntarily Anfissa Markovna stopped short.

"What you want?" the German asked in halting Russian.

"Why, I—this bread, look," Anfissa Markovna said, pointing to the loaf and explaining by gestures that she wanted to give it to the prisoners. "Give it to them, give it to them! They're starved! Just look at them!"

Many of the prisoners turned around to listen to Anfissa Markovna. A murmuration of voices passed down the column. Even the men standing at the head of the column, beyond the willows, turned around.

The German came up to Anfissa Markovna, took the loaf of bread with a displeased air, examined it and then handed it over to the prisoners.

"*Mach dass du fortkommst!*"* he shouted at Anfissa Markovna.

Now the other women were returning with bread and various articles of food they had hastily snatched up. Emboldened, they walked up to the column from both sides. The senior corporal—the man who had taken the bread from Anfissa Markovna—barked out an order. The guards broke into a hubbub and raised their tommy guns threateningly. Screaming, the women scattered.

Marika had no food, but she had approached the column with the others and was casting a hasty,

* Go away!

inquiring glance over the prisoners. When the women scattered she did not move. By that time the middle of the column had come up to the well, but the prisoner who had fallen down still could not get to his feet. He was a pitiful sight. He sat on the ground with his bare feet sprawled out and his grimy head thrown back. His fingers were spread out in the dust. He was in a tattered and bloody tunic with sleeves that were too short for him and a pair of shabby, skimpy breeches.

Beside the prisoner, wondering what to do with him, stood the German senior corporal. Marika looked down and gave a start. "It's him!" She recognized Loznevoi. A sudden decision flashed through her mind. Impetuously she ran up to the senior corporal, her face flushing a deep red.

"Leave him! Leave him here!" She was not asking but rather demanding, with fearless and blazing feminine resolution. "Where can you take him? Let the prisoner go. Where can you take him? Let him go!"

The senior corporal had just reached the conclusion that the prisoner was unable to go on and that he would have to be shot, as a number of others had been on the way. But Marika's sudden appearance prevented him from deciding the prisoner's fate irrevocably. The corporal did not have time to shout. He looked at Marika and froze in

astonishment: before him stood a young Russian *frau*, a genuine beauty; setting out on the eastern campaign he had dreamed of meeting just such barbarian women. . . . She wore a funny reddish plush garment which came down to her hips and was open at the breast. Her head was uncovered and her hair was combed down smoothly in the Russian fashion. Around her neck lay a coloured shawl. Quick and impetuous, she was not asking something but demanding it as though she knew that because of her beauty everything would be forgiven her; and she was demanding with such fire and such fearless determination that the corporal could not tear his gaze from her. What a miracle to come upon in such an isolated village! Obeying an unconscious impulse to appear gallant in Marika's eyes, he threw out his chest and smoothed his forelock, which hung in a limp, dusty curl. Finally he grasped what the Russian beauty wanted.

"Who is he?" he asked, forming the words precisely.

"My husband!" Marika burst out on an impulse "My husband!" she repeated.

Realizing that they were talking about him, the prisoner shifted his grimy head to the right. He fixed a vacant stare on Marika. Then he must have comprehended what fate was preparing for him, for all of a sudden he began to inch his

broken body toward Marika, clawing convulsively at the dust.

"My husband! My husband!" Marika continued to cry, pointing at the prisoner and then at herself. "He's mine! Understand? Mine!"

"Aha!" the German said at last.

"He's mine, mine!"

"Is it a trick?' the German asked suspiciously, recalling his duty. "*Nein?*"

"No, he's my man, he's mine!"

The kolkhoz women had gathered around again. They exchanged uncomprehending glances.

"They'll tell you!" Marika cried, turning to them with a look that explained everything. "Everybody will tell you! He's my husband!"

"Yes?" the German said, not finding any other word to say.

The women began to talk all at once:

"He's her husband! Her husband!"

"She's telling the truth!"

"He's from this village! He's her husband!"

The corporal could hardly tear his gaze from Marika. "That's romantic!" he thought. "Her husband is in my power. If I kill him now she'll be an unhappy woman, and if I let him go she'll be happy the rest of her life." Each passing moment increased the corporal's desire to appear gallant in Marika's eyes. Unexpectedly for himself, he came to a sudden decision to please this Russian

beauty. Twisting his lips into a smile, he pointed to the prisoner and then waved his hand toward the middle of the village.

"Take!" he said expansively. "Yours! Take!"

But here he noticed that many of the women standing around the beauty were holding parcels of food. He forgot his chivalrous sentiments and, feeling that after all some sort of compensation was due him for the prisoner, pointed first to the parcels and then to himself.

"Eggs! Butter! Give! Pork—give!"

"Give him the food, women," Anfissa Markovna ordered.

The moment they started to hand over the parcels the other Germans appeared out of nowhere. Even the guard standing at the head of the column ran up. Exchanging brief remarks the Germans began to inspect the bread and the pies, poke their fingers into the butter, and turn over the eggs in the baskets.

"They're good, they're good," Marika assured them.

"They're fresh as can be," Lukeria Boyarkina confirmed. "Hold them up to the sun and see for yourself."

At the word sun the corporal straightend up from the basket of eggs and looked toward the west. The sun now hung low over the distant forest. The bright colours of day were beginning to fade.

"*Wir müssen gehen*," he said rapidly. "*Es ist Zeit*!"*

The other Germans also glanced at the sun, then took everything the women offered and went to their places. The corporal waved his hand at the prisoner still sitting on the ground off to one side.

"Take! Take!" he said winking obscenely at Marika. "Husband? Take!"

"*Oh, ich verstehe*!" he explained to his men with a lewd grin. "*Eine so reizende Frau braucht einen Mann, um ihre Schönheit zu erhalten.*"**

The Germans burst into guffaws. Then they shouted at the prisoners, and the column started out of the village.

The leading guard marched along quickly, glancing at his map. He did not turn around. They had to reach the station before dark. When they had gone about three kilometres, he sensed that the column was lagging far behind. He turned around to shout at the prisoners. But instead he paused to stare long and attentively at the first row of the column. The tall man with piercing eyes whom he had struck at the well was shuffling wearily through the dust, as he had been on the way to Olkhovka. All day long a blond young fellow with a swollen and discoloured face had been marching at his side.

* We have to go. It's time.

** Oh, I understand. Such a pretty woman needs a husband to prevent her beauty from fading.

But now he was missing. Limping along in his place was an angular man with a big head, in a tunic without a left sleeve. His place before had been in the second row. Livid with rage, the guard tugged at the tommy gun slung around his neck.

"Halt!"

The column stopped. A quick roll call revealed that one of the prisoners—the blond fellow—was missing.

The infuriated German guards pulled ten men out of the column and shot them by the side of the road. Then the column continued on its way.

IV

Loznevoi barely managed to reach the Lopukhov house. He dropped in exhaustion on the steps. Marika ran inside. In a few moments the whole family poured out. Loznevoi lay on the steps, helplessly shifting his dirty feet.

"Him?" Erofei Kuzmich asked with a quick glance down.

"Yes, it's him, it's him!" Marika whispered.

"So it is. Water!"

With difficulty Loznevoi got up on his knees. Water was poured into his cupped hands. He slowly washed his face, rinsed his mouth and then looked up at the Lopukhovs.

"They knocked a tooth out," he said. "See?"

Erofei Kuzmich took a deep breath. "What's a tooth!" he remarked. Then, feeling the time had come to ask questions, he sat down on the steps. "How did it happen, eh?"

Marika handed Loznevoi an embroidered towel. The water had refreshed him. He wiped his face and hands leisurely.

"Yes, a tooth is nothing," he agreed. "But it's a miracle I wasn't killed. All the officers and commissars were—" He waved the towel.

"Given away?"

"What was there to give away? After they lined us up they could see it right off. They made everybody without cropped hair step out of the line.* And what they did! Right on the spot! It's my luck I shaved my head in your house then. . . ."

"But whose uniform is that?"

"Why, that—" Loznevoi surveyed himself in embarrassment, recalling the natty, well fitting uniform in which he had walked up the steps of the Lopukhov house three days before. "Well, father, there's nothing you can do about it. A man'll do anything to stay alive."

"Of course. . . ."

"So you see. Only everything's too small for me."

* Privates in the Soviet Army are required to wear their hair clipped short.—*Trans.*

"How did it happen, eh?" Erofei Kuzmich repeated.

Instead of replying Loznevoi merely waved the towel. Marika caught it, pulled it gently to her and, unable to hold back the question any longer, sat down a step below Loznevoi and asked in a voice quivering with emotion:

"Oh Lord, what about Andrei? Where is he? He was with you.... Where is he? Killed? Why don't you say something?"

Loznevoi had been expecting this question. While washing he had recalled Andrei's coming upon him in the forest and then running away into the obscurity of the trees after Yurgin. But now it occurred to him that most likely Andrei would never return, and that he would probably have to make a long stay in the Lopukhov house.

"What can I tell you?" Loznevoi glanced down at Marika and then shifted his eyes to the others. "What can I say?" He stared ahead fixedly, as though in deep suffering. "Many died there."

Before he had finished the sentence Marika crumpled in despair on the steps....

V

There was no sun that day. The world was shrouded in gloom, as if the dawn had broken but then, despite all its efforts, had been unable to rise

over the earth all day long. The eye could still distinguish the contours of the little hills and rises, especially the wooded ones, but all the hollows and gullies were lost in obscurity. The land lay drab and monotonous. There was a wintry wind.

Marika was walking through a lonely fir forest. She had flung open her plush jacket and pushed her shawl back off her head. She walked along slowly and wearily, yet her quick black eyes darted about unceasingly in search of something. The forest grew in a swampy area. The ground here was hummocky, and in places spongy; every now and then her foot swished over growths of moss and firm bilberry plants.

All of a sudden she stopped and clasped her hands to her breast. She held her breath, her gaze frozen on one spot.

"Andrei?" she gasped.

She moved forward cautiously, afraid to make a noise with her feet on the bilberries and moss. Under a medium-sized but spreading fir lay a man in army uniform. Five paces away from him she stopped.

"Andrei!" she suddenly cried. Throwing out her arms, she closed her eyes and staggered drunkenly to the fir.

The man was dead. He lay on his chest with his face in a clump of bilberries; his arms were bent at the elbow and thrown forward, as though in

his last minute he had wanted to dig his fingers into the little hummock in front of him. He was a tall, robust, broad-shouldered man. His tunic and his dark, bristly head were smeared with mud.

It was all as Loznevoi had described it to her: the thin forest, the fir, and under the fir—Andrei.... Marika did not remember dropping to her knees beside the body. She rocked from side to side, clutching at the bilberry plants, not knowing what to do. "Oh, Lord, it's him!" her whole being cried out. "My poor darling!" she took the dead man by the shoulders and with an effort turned him over on his back; the stiff body was as heavy as a water-soaked log. The face was grey and lean, and it had a small moustache. Marika recoiled in horror.

Looking around, only now did she notice other bodies among the hummocks, in the clumps of bilberries and golden ferns. She sprang to her feet and, trembling all over at the thought that in another second she would scream out at the top of her lungs, she ran away.

There were just as many bodies, however, in the place she was running to. She swerved off in another direction. Again bodies lay all around. She could have turned back, but there lay the moustached stranger with eyes wide open.... With faltering heartbeat she rushed forward out of this forest of

the dead, stumbling over the growths of moss and bilberry.

. . . Loznevoi had described the battle area in detail. He said he had seen Andrei lying at the foot of a fir tree, bleeding to death. This news had broken Marika's spirit. All evening long she had lain motionless on the bed in the best room. During the night she realized that she would not be able to live through it unless she saw Andrei, even if only his dead body. She wanted to sit beside him under that fir where he had been stricken by the enemy bullet, and sob out her grief to him. She wanted to look at his beloved face, and his big affectionate hands. She wanted to bury him herself, and then, in bitter solitude, to visit his grave. And in the middle of the night she came to a decision to go to the battlefield and find her dead Andrei.

At dawn she awakened her father-in-law.

"Get up, Pa, let's go," she said, just as though the evening before they had agreed on the trip and he knew where they were going. "Get up. It's growing light already."

Erofei Kuzmich did not know what it was all about. "Where to?" he asked.

"To look for Andrei!"

"Oh, my darling Andrei!" Alevtina Vassilievna moaned, as she had been moaning all night long. "Oh, my poor boy!" She wanted to support her daughter-in-law but she was unable to speak;

all she could do was sigh. "Oh, my little wheat ear!"

During the night Erofei Kuzmich himself had been thinking about searching for Andrei.

"Stop your wailing. We're going," he assured his wife and daughter-in-law as he climbed out of bed. "I meant to all along."

Before they left, Erofei Kuzmich again asked Loznevoi to describe the place where his son lay. Loznevoi expressed regret at not being able to accompany them—he could not stand on his feet—and again described the forest in which he had seen the dying Andrei.

"But will you find him? You don't know the place."

"I do. We'll look. After all, he's my son."

And so Marika and Erofei Kuzmich had come to the site of the recent battle. Traces of it were visible all over the thin fir forest. They frequently passed shell craters, scorched areas and hastily-dug foxholes, the bottoms of which were now covered with black water. Near the foxholes lay rifles, some broken, others intact, but all covered with a thick layer of rust; hand grenades in their cases; cartridge belts with clips in them, and scattered empty cartridges that had turned bright green with mould. There were crushed and dirty knapsacks with modest soldiers' belongings, torn cape-tents spattered with dark blood spots, gas masks in shoul-

der bags, dented canteens, helmets with bullet holes in them.

... Crazed with fear, Marika dashed out to the fringe of the forest. But here too there were traces of the battle everywhere; in and near the trenches lay bodies, and the ground was strewn with various weapons and army equipment. By now Marika was spent. In her haste she tripped and fell into a clump of withered weeds....

Marika had come to the battlefield taken up with her own grief. But when she saw how many men had perished there she realized that she was not alone in her sorrow. It was shared by many. By the entire nation. Was this the only place in the country drenched in blood? Were these the only ones to meet an untimely end on the expanses of her native land? These reflections did not allay Marika's grief, but black hatred of those who had come from the west sowing death suddenly welled up in her heart. In those minutes she felt better, firmer: hatred, like an elixir of life, gives strength.

... Erofei Kuzmich stood beside the cart, puffing at a cigarette. At sight of Marika his face twisted into a grimace of pain. He shook his head, and tears glistened on his cheeks and fair beard. Marika had never imagined that her father-in-law could cry.

"My heart felt it!" he quavered. "Oh, it felt it!" Again he shook his head.

Marika came up to the cart. She straightened the shawl on her head.

"Let's go, Pa."

"Ah, Andrei, Andrei!" Erofei Kuzmich sighed. He threw away the cigarette and went up to the horse.

Something covered with a cape-tent lay in the cart. Marika raised an edge of the covering, and her face instantly changed colour. Under it was a pile of sundry dirty and crumpled articles of clothing her father-in-law had picked up on the battlefield.

"I-I just picked it up on the way—" Erofei Kuzmich began in embarrassment. "It's all good stuff. Couldn't let it go to waste. . . ."

Marika tore her lowering gaze from Erofei Kuzmich, walked around the cart and set out impetuously toward the road.

"Where are you going, Marika? What's the matter?" Erofei Kuzmich called out, taking in the reins.

Marika halted. "Go by yourself," she replied in a low voice. "I'm going to walk."

Erofei Kuzmich followed her with his eyes a long time, his nostrils twitching. When her shawl began to bob up over the bushes he spat on the ground. "Bah, what a touchy female!"

VI

Toward evening the weather turned altogether bad. Murky clouds moved low over the dark fields and forests in an endless chain. Every now and then the wind swept the earth with a fine rain or a flurry of snow. Lone crows hastened away from the fields, fighting the wind, to reach their forest roosts.

Marika was so worn out by the day's efforts that she would not have made it to the house had not a passing refugee given her a ride in his cart. She parted with the refugee at the stream, where he turned off for the neighbouring village, and by the time she approached Olkhovka it was almost dark. She swerved off the road onto a short cut across the gully to the vegetable garden. Exhausted and chilled to the marrow, she made her way over the snowy path with difficulty. Just as she neared the steam bath a man came out of the door. She fell back with a cry.

The man was in army uniform, but barefoot and without a cap or a belt. Despite the twilight Marika took him in in a single glance: he was very young, fair-haired, and his face was swollen and covered with black-and-blue marks; his right eye was a narrow slit in a puffy and discoloured socket.

"D-don't be afraid," he stammered in a whisper to the speechless Marika, parting his lips in a sim-

ple, good-natured smile. "W-what are you afraid of? You know me. I've been hiding here all night and all day, and now I'm as f-frozen as a pup!"

He gave a shiver and came out on the path.

"N-no Germans in the village?"

"No, there aren't," Marika replied, taking another step back.

"What are you af-fraid of? Don't you recognize me?"

"My goodness!" Marika exclaimed softly. "Can it be you, Kostya?"

"Of c-course it's me."

"How you frightened me! What are you doing here?"

"T-take me into the house," Kostya said. He shuffled his bare feet on the snowy ground. "See? I'll tell the story inside. Is it cold! Looks l-like winter's coming."

"Lord, your feet! Come on!"

"For that I'll say th-thanks!"

"Wait—why are you stuttering like that?"

"C-contused," Kostya explained. "The battalion commander—is he in your house?"

"Your commander? Yes."

"I knew it. Well, l-let's get going! I'm frozen stiff. I've been wanting to go in a long time," Kostya confessed as he strode along after Marika. "But I'm afraid of your father-in-law."

Marika turned. "Why?"

"Keep walking, keep walking. You won't tell? He's k-kind of shady."

Erofei Kuzmich was at home. On the way back to Olkhovka he had caught a sturdy light-grey army horse in a grove near the road; at that time many horses were roaming the countryside, bereft of their masters by the war. He had taken the horse to be a gift of God, and he was so pleased with it that he completely forgot about his tiff with Marika. But when he returned home he had to explain to his wife why Marika had not come back with him.

Alevtina Vassilievna openly broke into tears, disregarding her husband's certain anger. Erofei Kuzmich was flabbergasted by this unexpected display of boldness. He went outside without even shouting at her. Until dusk he worked in the shed, fixing up a stall for the horse. "What a plague!" he muttered to himself, thinking about his unsubmissive daughter-in-law. "Just look at all the disturbance she causes in the house. Every day it's something new. Nothing suits her, nothing! And then she brought that fellow in.... She could have asked him all that out there. She brought him in without thinking what for. What use is he now? Only an extra mouth to feed. And all the bother! At a time like this, eh?"

No sooner had Erofei Kuzmich re-entered the house than Marika came in. When he saw Kostya

in the doorway behind her, all bruised and blue with the cold, he was struck dumb by this new trouble. It cost him great effort to restrain his fury. Without acknowledging Kostya's greeting he followed him with his eyes to the door of the best room, where Loznevoi lay.

"Is that all?" he flung out over his shoulder at Marika, breathing heavily and angrily. "Or will there be some more?"

Loznevoi gave a cry of recognition. He threw off his blanket and started to get up.

"Kostya? You too? You here too?"

He was not at all like the sullen, unsociable battalion commander of a few days before. His joy knew no bounds.

"Kostya, old man, how are you? Come here, come here!"

Alevtina Vassilievna, Marika and Vasyatka were looking on with interest from the doorway. Kostya glanced at them with his sound left eye and pointed to his feet with a guilty smile.

"I'll track up your floor. . . ."

"Never mind, never mind," Erofei Kuzmich said.

"Kostya, what happened to you? Tell me."

Kostya wiped his wet, swollen face with his palm. On his left cheekbone there was a particularly large bruise; it looked as though someone had run a grater over it.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant, how could I desert

you?" he said, approaching the bed. "The moment I recognized you in the column I said to myself: now we're together! I won't move a step without my battalion commander!"

He sat down beside the bed on a trunk covered with a cheap print. "And so I skipped!" he said, flashing his youthful smile.

"How?"

"Why, yesterday! When those Germans near you started fussing with the food—I hopped away from the well. And then around the vegetable patch." He broke into a laugh at the recollection. "Went down the gully head over heels! Crushed all the bushes!"

Kostya was so glad to see his commander that what he had lived through the previous twenty-four hours now seemed nothing more than a joke. As he told the story he kept laughing; so does the unpleasant past fade before the present, if the present is a happy one.

Loznevoi was no less glad to see Kostya. During the day spent lying in the Lopukhov house he had realized that living alone among strangers would be difficult. Now his orderly had unexpectedly appeared. He had not known Kostya long, no more than a week; still Kostya was by no means a stranger. He felt this was very important in their life together now. Besides, while he was commander of the battalion Kostya had been accustomed to

obeying him implicitly and treating him with special attention and respect. Now this was no less important than before. And so when Kostya finished the story of his escape, Loznevoi praised him unreservedly.

"Bravo, Kostya, bravo! Well, now that we're together it'll be easier. Remember the saying: a log by itself will go out even in a stove, but two together will burn even in a field. Right?"

"Ex-xactly! Your hearing come back already?" Kostya added, suddenly remembering. "All c-cured?"

Loznevoi was embarrassed. "Yes, Kostya," he answered in a low voice.

"It cleared up fast. Me, I was all right at first, but then it got my t-tongue—"

"Kostya! Why, you're shaking like a leaf!"

"I'm frozen. It's cold outside."

Marika entered the room. "Come behind the stove," she ordered, "and warm up. You'll have plenty of time to talk afterwards. Your feet are frozen stiff. Warm up, there'll be a samovar right away."

Kostya went over to the stove.

"I can't thank you enough for Kostya," Loznevoi said to Marika. "It's very good that you brought him here."

Kostya came from the Kama River region. He had been in the army for about two years. If not

for the war he would have returned home that autumn. Quick, keen and efficient, he was an ideal orderly. All the officers in the battalion knew and loved him. In return for this love Kostya was ready to go through fire and water for them.

Like the rest of the men, Kostya did not take to the new battalion commander at first. He quickly forced himself to respect Loznevoi as well, however. He was used to placing implicit faith in his commanders, carrying out their orders unconditionally, and looking always to their needs; if necessary, he was ready to lay down his life for them. To him this was what army discipline, stern and just, meant.

Kostya had lived through difficult hours on the battlefield near the Vazuza. After the bombing he started out for the medical aid station with Loznevoi, as Captain Ozerov had ordered. But in the first grove they came to Loznevoi told him to return to battalion headquarters. "I'll get there by myself," he said. When the tanks broke through, Kostya rushed into the forest to save his commander, but he could not find him. With tears in his eyes he searched through all the bushes and small grassy gullies. The German tommy gunners captured him before he had a chance to fire.

Late that evening Loznevoi was also led into the deserted little village in which the prisoners

were herded. Kostya recognized him immediately despite the enlisted man's uniform. Not once during all the while they marched along did Kostya manage to speak to his battalion commander. But when the opportunity to flee arose in Olkhovka he took it without a second's thought, spurred on by the hope that he would find his commander, who had escaped by a miracle, and that he would share his fate with him, whatever it was, as his soldierly duty dictated....

... The samovar came to a boil and Kostya was awakened for tea. He crawled out from behind the stove, his body heavy with warmth, and stared in surprise at the battalion commander. Loznevoi was sitting at the table, mirrored in the copper side of the steaming samovar. He wore a tobacco-coloured Russian shirt with a high neck, roomy black trousers and rough, sturdy boots. His head and chin were already covered with an ashen-brown stubble. Now his greyish eyes shone with a much softer light than usual in his lean face. But he still smiled crookedly, with a faint twist of the left side of his face only.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"It's hard to," the confused Kostya admitted.

"Our host brought in a batch of clothing," Loznevoi said. He nodded at Erofei Kuzmich on the other side of the table. "Well, father, again I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You're

helping us out fine. We'll be grateful the rest of our lives."

"You're welcome. How could you go around in yours?"

Erofei Kuzmich rose and, turning to Kostya, pointed to the trunk, on which lay a pair of old trousers patched at the knees, a faded blue shirt and a pair of army shoes with puttees.

"That's for you, young fellow," he said. "Put it on and wear it in good health. Don't blame me because there's no boots; even those shoes I just found on the road today."

Kostya sat down on the trunk and picked up the shoes.

"I'll t-take only these," he replied, casting an unfriendly look at Erofei Kuzmich with his left eye. "All the rest you can t-take back."

Erofei Kuzmich was offended. "You don't want it? Well, I haven't got anything better. Don't blame me for it. You know yourself what the times are like."

"I d-don't need anything. I've got my uniform. I'll wash it out and wear it. I'm not s-supposed to take it off."

Loznevoi joined in the conversation. "Listen, Kostya, what do you think this is, the army?"

"Makes no difference," Kostya replied stubbornly, speaking this way to his commander for the first time. "I can't take it off. These p-past few days it's become part of my heart."

"But how can you go around in uniform now? How will you get along?"

"We'll see."

Erofei Kuzmich gathered up the trousers and shirt and went off into the kitchen, slamming the door. Kostya started to put on the shoes. There was a minute's silence in the room. The samovar sang in a high, mournful key.

"You're making a mistake, Kostya," Loznevoi said. For an instant the cold, steely glitter came into his eyes again. "Our one aim now is to save ourselves, to keep alive. To do that we don't need an army uniform. It's gone out of fashion now around here. If you want to save yourself you have to take it off. And you should only thank our host instead of offending him. He's got a nasty character, but now he's doing us a good turn."

"What's good about it!" Kostya objected again, without turning. "That's n-not out of kindness. He's giving us clothes so we can g-go away from him sooner. Here's clothes for you, and get out! And the uniform—it's in fashion everywhere now."

"Only not here. If you want to live you've got to take it off."

Kostya stopped winding his right puttee, straightened up and looked at his former battalion commander. It was impossible to make out the expression on his swollen face, but his soft lips, always touched with a youthful warmth, twitched bitterly.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant!" he said, slightly raising his cracked voice.

"You know, Kostya," Loznevoi interrupted, "I wanted to warn you right off: forget my rank. Understand? Forget it! And call me just by my name now."

"Loznevoi?" Kostya asked in surprise.

"No, I'm Zarubin now."

"What—you don't want your name either?"

"No. It's not necessary."

There was much they had to talk over that evening. But they drank their tea in silence, listening to the wail of the angry October wind and the heavy creaking of the birches beyond the window.

VII

During the night a thick layer of clouds covered the sky. The wind abated, and a fine, penetrating rain came down. It quickly made all the roads impassable and flooded the low places. The bleakest period of autumn had set in. Olkhovka was cut off from the rest of the world. It led a lethargic existence those days. No lights were lit in the evenings; most of the twenty-four hours of the day the village lay buried in deep autumn gloom. At night the dogs barked sadly and foreboddingly.

"Well, thank God!" Erofei Kuzmich exclaimed. "Deep mud's a sure thing. In times like these it's just what we need."

Inwardly he was confident that now the villagers would break away from the kolkhoz and strip the kolkhoz storehouses clean. "They'll soon break away," he thought. "No matter how you feed a wolf he'll always keep looking at the forest." But, to his surprise, the villagers did not even mention disbanding the kolkhoz. "What people!" Erofei Kuzmich grumbled, burning with impatience. "They used to complain that life in the kolkhoz was hard, but now that they're free to leave it they don't say a word! Hypocrites!" Yet he did not want to be the one to broach the subject of a division.

As for the villagers, they said nothing about it. Those bleak, rainy days they rarely went beyond their own yards; what they thought was unknown. No kolkhoz work went on: the weather interfered. Besides, who was there to call the people out to work? Only one member of the kolkhoz board was left—Osip Mikhailovich, and he was ill and kept to his house. The sole occupant of the office now was Curly Yasha, who bore the droll nickname of "deputy chairman." Only rarely did a chance visitor step into the office; the odour of tobacco smoke that had hung in the room completely disappeared.

VIII

Curly Yasha was a half-wit. He had been brought up by the village, and everybody loved him. Yasha had big affectionate eyes and dark luxuriant curls. He was short and his body was slightly crooked; one felt he was used not to breasting life's difficulties but to edging along sideways. This disfigurement, however, was noticeable only upon close examination, so attractively did his affectionate eyes light up his face and so glossy were his dark curls.

Curly Yasha always rose early and looked in on his neighbours punctually, like a doctor. He would walk into a house, have a smoke with the host at the threshold, pass on the news, and then go farther. Many of the villagers invited him in themselves. Kindhearted housewives called him in for a hot meal. Yasha ate little, was neat at the table, and never accepted alms. In many of the houses his visits usually ended in talk about his marrying.

"Well, Yasha," the housewife would remark from her place by the stove, "when are you going to get married? I just can't wait to see the day!"

Yasha would shake his curls in glee.

"Married?"

"Or haven't you found a girl yet? Why, there's plenty of girls!"

"He needs an educated one," the host would put in with a wink.

"Ah, the schoolteacher? So that's it! Let him take her. She's a lovely girl."

Yasha liked talking about marriage. He screwed up his eyes gallantly.

"Nina Dmitrievna!"

"Well, what's wrong with her?"

"She loves me. She said I'm curly-haired and nice, so there! She said so herself!"

"If she loves you, then why waste time? Get married. She's a schoolteacher, and you're the 'deputy chairman,' not just anybody!"

Whenever Yasha was called "deputy chairman" he would spring up and grab his battered brief case, a gift from Stepan Boyarkin. "I've got to go," he would say with a worried frown.

And off he would go to the kolkhoz office. He carried out the simple tasks Stepan Boyarkin gave him willingly, quickly and accurately; when he was sent on an errand, he ran; when an extra pair of hands was needed for some job, he was always on the spot. All morning long his name was called out in the office: "Yasha! Yashenka!"

When the morning's affairs were settled, Yasha would sit down at a free desk and start going through the contents of his brief case. If the office were noisy at such times Stepan Boyarkin would occasionally raise his voice to call for quiet.

"Hey, you!" he would say in feigned anger. "Stop that noise! Don't you see a man is working?"

At noon, when the kolkhoz folk returned home from work to have their dinner and to rest, the village store opened up. Yasha would follow Serga Hakhai, the clerk, inside. Here, too, he found work to do. While Serga Hakhai playfully clicked the counters of the abacus, handled money and joked with the girls, Yasha poured out kerosene and weighed salt. Many of the women customers addressed not the clerk but Yasha.

"Yasha, how about three kilos of salt?"

"Yasha dear, have you got machine oil?"

"Yes, yes," Yasha would answer. "A ruble twenty. How much do you need?"

"Thanks, Yasha. Step in, Yasha dear, I'll treat you to a glass of milk."

"And we've got fresh kvass. Step in."

"I'll come, I'll come," Yasha would promise.

Yasha worked in the kolkhoz office and the village store unselfishly, purely out of the goodness of his heart. The villagers were touched by this.

"A fine lad!" they said of him.

Now that the heads of the village had left, Curly Yasha, who really looked upon himself as Stepan Boyarkin's deputy, considered it his duty to be in the deserted office building all the time. Early in the morning he would lean his curly head out over

the ledge above the big Russian stove on which he slept, and ask Ageyevna, the watchwoman:

"How's the weather, eh?"

"Rain."

Yasha would be indignant. "Again no work! What a shame, eh?"

All day long he examined and leafed through various old kolkhoz ledgers the bookkeeper had left behind in the closet, rummaged in the desk drawers, looked through his scrawled notebooks, and earnestly drew up what looked like lists and reports.

Occasionally the ailing Osip Mikhailovich, the kolkhoz steward, dropped in, tapping heavily with his stick as he walked. He would sit down on a bench, stretch out his right leg, place his stick next to it, and start puffing away on a cigarette.

"How're things, comrade deputy?" he would ask with a wry twist of his lips, sadly surveying Yasha, bent over Stepan Boyarkin's desk.

Yasha would tear himself away from his papers. "Ah, it's Osip Mikhailovich! Coming along," he would reply gaily. "They're coming along all right."

"How about the threshing? Held up?"

"Look at the weather!"

"Oh, Yasha, Yasha!" Osip Mikhailovich would sigh. "So that's life, eh?"

After chatting with Yasha the steward would leave, making more noise with his stick than be-

fore. Yasha, tired of fussing with the papers, would have dinner with the watchwoman and then begin to shape figurines of cows and horses out of tar. One day he had found a small barrel half full of tar in the storeroom. Now he kept the barrel in the office, and when idle and bored frequently took to modeling. On one of the windows sills a herd of cows was grazing, and on another frolicked a herd of fat-bellied horses. Yasha wanted his "kolkhoz" to have more and more stock, however. When he let out a new cow or horse to pasture he would look at it with shining eyes and shake his glossy curls in glee.

IX

In the middle of the night there was an event that roused the entire village. All of a sudden the dogs bestirred themselves and raised a mournful, nerve-racking howl. The villagers rushed to their windows. Out past the southern edge of the village a tongue of flame was surging skyward, showering the autumn darkness with sparks.

"The stacks are burning!" someone exclaimed.

People ran out of their houses and ploughed through the thick mud toward the fire. It was true: the threshing shed, which stood in an isolated place, and the spring grain stacked around it, were burning. It was impossible to come near the shed;

the whole roof was in flames, the stacks were throwing off a fierce heat and the wind was whipping dense clouds of white smoke around them. Everybody realized that the grain had been set on fire—and by somebody from the village. The people stood around for a long time, exclaiming sadly:

"The grain's lost!"

"It would have been lost anyway!"

"Maybe not."

"One of us set it on fire. Who else?"

Curly Yasha also came out to watch the fire. But he wore only a thin coat, and at the advice of the villagers Ageyevna took him home. There, as they warmed themselves by the stove, they bewailed the loss of the grain.

"Oh, what a pity!" Yasha said, shaking his curly head.

"We sowed it and we harvested it," Ageyevna sobbed.

"One of us did it," Yasha explained, passing on what he had heard. "Who else?"

Just as they were about to lie down to sleep out the remainder of the night, something totally unexpected happened: the telephone in the corner where the bookkeeper used to sit rang sharply. They had forgotten all about the telephone—it had been idle several days already—and now the ring.

Ageyevna was upset. "Dear me! What's that? Who can that be? In the middle of the night!"

"From the district centre!" Yasha exclaimed, rushing over to the phone.

Yasha had always looked forward to the ring of the telephone with impatience, especially when the bookkeeper was absent. The moment the telephone rang he would spring over to it, crank the handle with a smile, cautiously put the receiver to his ear, blow into the mouthpiece, and say importantly:

"Yes, yes, Olkhovka! Yes, I'm listening! Who? Right away!"

"Is that you, Yasha?"

"It's me, me!" Yasha would reply, his face shining.

"Well, how are you getting along?"

"Fine, Comrade Chairman."

"How are things in Olkhovka?"

"Coming along!"

"Well, all right, Yasha, keep well," the district chief would say in conclusion. "Is Boyarkin there?"

"He's right here!"

"Then give him the receiver."

Yasha knew that night calls from the district centre were always about matters of special importance. Excited, he gave an answering ring and put the receiver to his ear. He heard a firm voice that set the membrane vibrating. At first he could not make out a single word, and he kept outshouting the distant voice with his usual "Yes, yes, Olkhovka! Yes, I'm listening!"

Finally the voice became distinct. "Olkhoffka, yes?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Your fillage fire, yes?"

"Why the village? The stacks are burning!"

"Who? What tacks?"

"Stacks, stacks!"

The receiver was silent for a few seconds. The faint voices of two men talking near the telephone in Bolotnoye could be heard. Then the membrane began to vibrate again.

"Grain, yes?"

"Yes, yes, grain!"

"Who set it fire?"

"One of us did it," Yasha replied. "Who else?"

"What you mean one of you? Your fillage?"

"How can you tell? Only everybody says it's one of us."

Again the receiver was silent for a few seconds. Yasha blew excitedly into the mouthpiece, and the membrane vibrated as it had before.

"Who are you?"

Yasha grinned from ear to ear.

"Me? The deputy chairman. Yes, the deputy chairman. The chairman's gone, but I'm here. . . ."

Ageyevna, who at first had been following the conversation from her place by the stove, moved closer to Yasha; a tense, worried expression had come over her wrinkled face. Suddenly she strode

up to Yasha, snatched the receiver from his hand and pushed him away without saying a word. She hastily brushed a strand of hair back from her ear and put the receiver to it.

"He's no deputy!" she shouted into the phone at the top of her voice, as though she were talking to a neighbour across the yard. "Deputy! Lord, he's a half-wit, why do you listen to him?"

She took a breath and then dropped her voice a bit. "Who's that speaking? What do you want, eh?"

The next instant she fell back against the wall and the hand holding the receiver dropped limply to her side. "Holy Mother of God, it's them!"

Flinging the receiver down on the rest, Ober-Lieutenant Gobelmann, the recently-appointed commandant in the district centre of Bolotnoye, stood up over the desk, on which lay a large coloured map. A short man in a brand-new uniform, he had a hard-bitten face that now bore a disturbed expression. He shook back the dark tuft of hair that had fallen onto his broad forehead and brought his fist down on the map with restrained force.

"The defil! What you say?"

A few feet away, to the left of the desk, stood an elderly seedy-looking individual with a bright pink bald spot on the top of his head; he was dressed in a cheap, crumpled suit. In his trembling fingers he held a pencil and a dog-eared notebook.

"They've set it on fire!" he replied hastily with a quick shrug of his bony shoulders. "That's the instructions from Moscow—from Stalin himself. I don't remember the date. Now everywhere they're burning what they didn't have time to burn when they retreated. They're dooming us all to starvation!"

"How far is it to Olkhoffka?"

The bald-headed man with the notebook sighed. "Oh, Herr Ober-Lieutenant, that's such a godforsaken place! About thirty kilometres. It stands on a hill, and that's why we can see the fire so well. But most likely it's impossible to reach the village now. The bridges are wrecked—by the Red Army, of course. Mud and swamps! It's the most godforsaken place you could imagine. And the people there are all ignorant."

"All right," the commandant said. "You may go."

When the bald-headed man had minced out of the room, Gobelmann resumed his wicker armchair and began to speak in German. "A distasteful character, Herr Doctor, isn't he?"

At the desk to Gobelmann's right, also in a plain wicker armchair, sat a lean man in the uniform of an army doctor, with a small snakelike head fixed on a long neck. High up on his bony nose were perched pince-nez with rectangular lenses and a gold-plated spring with rubber clamps that dug

into his flesh; a thin chain ran from the right lens to his ear. This was Doctor Rhöde.

"Yes, indeed!" Rhöde answered without changing his pose. "I have been observing him. He is a typical representative of a nation destined by fate itself to extinction. Yes, he is a slave—and for that he was created." He drew his fountain pen out of his pocket with a lazy gesture. "At every step I have to make notes for my book."

"Have you much material already, Doctor?"

"Yes, indeed!" Rhöde passed his tongue over his thin dry lips. "But more is necessary. It is for that purpose, Herr Ober-Lieutenant, that I am making a stay here. As you probably know, Russian tribes settled in this region a very long time ago. Here we have the genuine Rus, as it was formerly called. Have you noticed how wild and quiet it is all around here?"

"But there are fires here, too," Gobelmann protested guardedly. "Take that lonely village of Olkhovka. Do you know what there is there? Soviet power is still there!"

Rhöde adjusted his pince-nez a trifle higher. "Oh!"

"Yes, yes! I just now talked to that—that deputy chairman of the kolkhoz. See what happens? It's extremely difficult, Doctor, to assimilate these areas! And you yourself know the tasks set us in this war."

"Not all at once, not all at once, old man. You'll assimilate them," Rhöde said encouragingly. "Who of you will go to that village where the fire is?"

Gobelmann reflected, rubbing his fingers over his smoothly-shaven chin.

"That same Lieutenant Kweiss," he replied. "So far there's nobody else. Would you like to visit that out-of-the-way Russian village with him, Doctor? He will set out soon. I trust you will be able to find unique material for your book there."

"Yes, I will think it over," Rhöde answered, after a pause. "You know I am in a hurry to get to Moscow, don't you? I want to see the parade of our army with my own eyes. That should be an extraordinary historical spectacle!"

Gobelmann sighed. "I envy you," he said. "They say the parade has been fixed for the seventh of November."

"Yes. Do you understand how symbolic that is?"

A minute later Lieutenant Kweiss stood in front of the commandant's table. He was a tall, beefy man with broad womanish backsides over which his trousers and the bottom of his uniform jacket stretched tight. He wore yellow hobnailed boots. His head grew right out of his shoulders; at the temples it was quite bald, and on top there was a tuft that looked like a cockscomb. It was difficult to make out the expression of his bloated, practical-

ly browless face with its tiny, almost invisible grey eyes.

"Kweiss, tomorrow you will receive full instructions," Gobelmann said. "When you have finished up in the villages already indicated you will visit Olkhovka as well. If you cannot reach it by car you will go on horseback. For a certain period, until further instructions, Olkhovka will be your residence."

Kweiss put two fingers to his temple.

"I obey, Herr Ober-Lieutenant!"

"That village is here. Look—" Gobelmann bent over the map.

X

When the villagers began to return from the fire Ageyevna ran out on the steps and called several women over. She told them about the conversation with the Germans, exaggerating heavily. Despite the late hour this news quickly spread through the village. People rushed to the kolkhoz office, calling anxiously to one another in the darkness as they sloshed through the mud and the puddles.

The women who came to the office showered Curly Yasha with questions. He sat at Stepan Boyarkin's desk and, believing he was fulfilling his duty as deputy chairman, kept squinting with

pleasure at the lamp. Yasha's weak mind and memory prevented him from giving a coherent account of his conversation with the Germans. Aware of his failings, the frightened women asked him questions, and all Yasha did was answer. Out of the goodness of his heart, striving to please, he gave affirmative answers to almost all the questions.

"Yasha dear, what did he do—swear?"

"He swore," Yasha replied with a smile.

"Did he ask who set it on fire?"

"Uh-huh, that's what he asked."

"Yasha, and did he threaten?"

"My, did he threaten!"

"He said they'll come soon? Did he?"

"Yes, yes, that's right."

"I'll show them—is that what he said? Yes?"

"Uh-huh, I'll show them!"

"Lord, women, we're lost!"

Now Ageyevna, who at first had garbled the story, herself began to believe that the conversation had taken place in just that way. "That's right. women," she confirmed readily. "It's all true."

In a few minutes of talking with Curly Yasha the women worked themselves up into a complete fright. Panicky cries arose:

"Now they'll come down on us, women!"

"They'll give it to us all for that grain!"

"What should we do? What should we do?"

Just then Erofei Kuzmich walked in. He looked

worried, and his gaze was dark. That morning he had warily put the question of what to do about the seed and the implements to a group of kolkhoz members he had met. None of them had said a word, however. Erofei Kuzmich had become genuinely worried. "I'll be left without seed!" he had thought in despair. "Either somebody here will set it on fire or the Germans will come and clean it out! How can I talk them into dividing up?" Now Erofei Kuzmich realized that the time had come to act.

"There's nothing to moan about," he said, sitting down on a stool near the stove. "What will be will be. Tomorrow or the day after they'll come. And they'll pick us clean. What's the sense of waiting for that? There's the seed lying in the granary. They'll drive up and load it. They'll even make us load it. And then there's the horses and implements in the yard...."

Voices rose from the crowd of women:

"What shall we do, Erofei Kuzmich?"

"What? We ought to divide everything up...."

A deep silence settled over the room.

"Well, what else is there to do?" Erofei Kuzmich said, although nobody had objected to his proposal about a division. "They're the strong ones now. Divide up—and that's that! And when they come they can search us high and low but they won't find a thing. Am I right?"

The women stood around in silence, their heads lowered.

"Why don't you say something?"

"But how will we sow in the spring?" Ulyana Shutyaeva asked for all of them. "Each on his own?"

"Everything is possible. . . ."

"Won't our army really come back?"

Without waiting for Erofei Kuzmich's reply Panya Goryunova, the young soldier's wife, broke the silence with a sob. The other women pressed close to one another and began to cry too.

"Damn it, what a weepy tribe!" Erofei Kuzmich rose. "Now they're off! Well, wail away if you want to. But tomorrow morning we have to settle the matter." He walked out, slamming the door.

All night long the villagers talked about what to do, sighing and sobbing. They reflected about many things, about all the recent years of their lives.

They recalled the time when the kolkhoz was founded, and how hard it had been for them to give up the customs of centuries, how terrifying to take that step into the unknown. They recalled the difficult early years of life in the kolkhoz, new and difficult years, when this had gone wrong and that and the next thing, and how they had suffered because things were going wrong, how they had sighed for the life of individual farming, when

everything, they thought, had been easier and freer. But when had all that been? A long, long time ago.

In recent years the kolkhoz had been on the upgrade. They had erected sturdy and spacious outbuildings, acquired various farm machines, built up sizable herds, laid out a large orchard and vegetable garden, learned to grow big harvests, and, most important of all, had learned to work together without getting in one another's way, each contributing his skill to the common effort. All had begun to live fairly comfortably. True, a person always wants more than he has, and the people of Olkhovka also dreamed of a better life. But now they knew that in the kolkhoz their dreams were feasible. They all realized that the most difficult period lay behind them, that once the kolkhoz was on the upgrade, things would keep on improving from year to year, the way a tree spreads its branches farther and farther with each passing year once it has taken firm root.

And now it was all breaking up because of some alien and evil will. It was horrible to contemplate. They dearly loved what they had built up and become accustomed to during the ten years; everything connected with the kolkhoz had become firmly attached to their hearts, and if torn out there would be blood. . . .

XI

The morning broke cold and windy. The eastern half of the sky had cleared, but the western was ominously dark. The pigeons sat in the attic windows ruffling their feathers. They looked around with surprise at the changes the period of bad weather had worked in the village: the denuded birches wept wearily and hopelessly, and the airy heights were so uninviting that a bird did not even feel like raising its wing.

The villagers began to assemble at the kolkhoz yard on the southern outskirts of Olkhovka. Here stood a roomy stable erected on a foundation of grey stone, near it a barn and cart and harness sheds, and to the side a bright and airy cowshed with a wooden roof, and a well-built sheepshed; on the other side of the yard stood a smithy and a machine shed, and farther off, granaries. At the entrance there was a little old cabin in which the brigade leaders used to hand out the day's assignments in the mornings and where those who worked in the yard gathered in the evenings to warm up and chat.

The yard, always a noisy, bustling place, was now deserted. Few horses were left. All the kolkhoz livestock had been driven off to the east. Two old grooms wandered aimlessly about the yard.

The villagers congregated in the cabin. They

talked in low voices about the weather and the war.

Erofei Kuzmich deliberately came late: he did not want to leave himself open to the accusation that he was the most active proponent of a division. As he turned the corner of the lane leading out to the yard he caught sight of Efim Chernyavkin. At the beginning of the war Efim Chernyavkin had been called up to the army, but he had deserted from his unit during the retreat and come back home. Up to that day he had kept in hiding, although many knew already that he was at home.

Erofei Kuzmich waited for him to come up. "Well, crawled out?"

Chernyavkin greeted him with a slight tip of his hat. He was in an old work jacket and broken boots. He wore a short black beard.

"It's about time, Kuzmich," he replied amicably. "If I sat there any longer I guess they'd grab everything here."

"Thinking of remaining?"

"Yes, there's hopes."

"What's the beard for? Just in case?"

"No, I'll shave it off now."

Several women came up.

"The war, the war!" Erofei Kuzmich said in a loud voice, with a sigh. "They ran away—scattered to their homes and their women! Of course the Germans'll come! Fighters, huh! My son even passed

through here—everybody knows it—but you didn't find him remaining! Off he went!" he lifted his head proudly. "He went off to fight, once it had to be done, and now he's been killed, people say. . . ."

At the recollection of Andrei, he became genuinely upset. His face twisted in pain.

"If they all fought like that! It would be a different story! Everybody thinks only about himself. . . ."

"What kind of a war is this?" Chernyavkin muttered. "The minute they hit us everybody ran! What do you expect us to do—go at the tanks with clubs?"

The women standing around looked contemptuously at Efim Chernyavkin.

"And so you took right to the bushes?" Lukeria Boyarkina shouted at him.

"Our brave defender!" Ulyana Shutyaeva exclaimed scornfully. "You think tanks didn't come at my husband too? Why didn't he run away?"

"We'll see—maybe he'll come running in yet." Chernyavkin muttered in reply, running his bleary eyes over the women; before coming out in public he had taken a drink to bolster up his courage.

"No he won't!" Ulyana raised her voice still higher. "He's not that kind! And even if he did, I'm not like your fine beauty: I wouldn't let him into

the house! God forbid, you'll never find me going to bed with a man like you, a deserter!"

"What are you cackling about?" Chernyavkin countered.

"Wha-at? Why, you miserable tramp!" Anfissa Markovna exclaimed, advancing on him. "You rotten worm! And you have the nerve to talk!" She spat in disgust. "By God, women, I can't even bear the sight of him. Let's go, women!"

Erofei Kuzmich squeezed into the cabin and sat down unobtrusively on a bench near the door. It was growing quieter and quieter in the room: the weather and the war had already been exhausted.

"Who else are we waiting for?" a woman suddenly spoke up from behind the stove in a strong clear voice. "Let's get started!"

"Yes, everyone seems to be here."

"Where's Erofei Kuzmich? Has he come?"

"There he is, near the door."

"Well, Erofei Kuzmich?" Chernyavkin said. "Who else should we wait for? You start."

Erofei Kuzmich stood up. "You're queer people," he said with a shake of his thick beard. "Who am I to start? I'm nobody here—you know that yourself. I'm just a rank and filer."

Voices called out:

"We're all rank and filers."

"But somebody has to begin."

"Now everybody's going to point to everybody else."

"Go ahead, begin."

The outer door opened with a creak and Curly Yasha appeared on the threshold, a brief case under his arm. His affectionate eyes glowed with pleasure.

"Why should I begin?" Erofei Kuzmich said. "The deputy chairman himself has just come in."

"A meeting?" Yasha asked happily.

"Everybody's here," Erofei Kuzmich replied with mock respect. "We were just waiting for you. Will you deliver a report?"

Chernyavkin guffawed.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, making fun of him," Anfissa Markovna said sternly.

The gathering fell silent. Grandpa Silanty gave a cough. Lifting his shoulders above the crowd and almost touching the low ceiling with his hat, he turned to the door, his weak eyes searching for Erofei Kuzmich. "Begin, Erofei. Why don't you? Seeing it's a matter like this—"

"But I don't know how," Erofei Kuzmich said. Then, clearing his throat, he started to make his way forward. The people moved aside to let him pass. "I really don't know," he said. When he reached the desk he took off his hat and began to twist it in his hands. "It makes me feel terrible. We worked and built up and grew prosperous, and now look—it's all going to fall apart. Is that right?"

Many lowered their heads.

"Erofei, don't torture us," someone said softly.

Erofei Kuzmich sighed. "Well, I never went against the community. Since such a calamity has hit us, we have to remake our lives. So we'll talk business, right?"

At that moment someone remembered the kolkhoz steward. "Where's Osip, women?"

"He hasn't been here at all."

"That's a fine one! How could we have forgotten?"

"Yasha dear, run over and call Osip. Where is he?"

"Yasha, where are you?"

To everyone's surprise, however, Yasha was also missing. In the crowd no one had noticed him slip away. Several people ran off to look for Osip Mikhailovich.

In a short while a voice came from the door, "He's in the stable."

"What's he doing there?" Erofei Kuzmich asked.

"Sitting and crying."

In a body the villagers poured out into the yard. Osip Mikhailovich emerged from the stable, leaning heavily on his stick. After him came Curly Yasha, pale and frightened, the brief case still under his arm. He stopped in the doorway. Osip Mikhailovich continued to walk forward.

"Well?" he asked hoarsely, looking at Erofei Kuzmich unashamed of his tears. "Want to go back to farming on your own? Your guts not strong enough?"

Erofei Kuzmich stepped toward Osip Mikhailovich. "That's not the question—"

"Then what is?" Through his tears Osip Mikhailovich's gaze was bold and irreconcilable.

"You don't know? Look at what the Germans are doing! In broad daylight! They'll take away all the grain and burn our houses down. Should we wait for that?"

"If they take it they'll answer for it," Osip Mikhailovich rasped. "But why should we take it all? And how can we lift our hands against that property?" He pointed to the stables and the cart and machine sheds. "What part of this is your own, Erofei Kuzmich? What did you build up, eh? Can you remember? Where's yours, Chernyavkin? Where's yours—what's your name?—where's yours, Fetinya? Everything here is common property! Common!" he exclaimed, stretching out his neck and opening his eyes wide. "How can you tear it to pieces? Better tear my heart out! Here, tear it out!" He stepped toward the crowd. "Tear it out, but while I'm alive I won't let you get at the property and I won't give up the keys to the granaries!"

The villagers stood about silent and motionless.

A stab went through Erofei Kuzmich's heart: it was a bad silence.

"Aha, so that's it!" All of a sudden his face turned livid. He took a big step toward the steward. "Who are you saving it for?" he uttered through clenched teeth. "For the Germans? So that when they come you can say, here, take it? Is that it?"

Osip Mikhailovich's lame leg gave a violent twitch. He rocked back and almost dropped his stick. Pale and confused, he looked angrily from under his bushy brows into Erofei Kuzmich's piercing eyes.

"So that's what you're like, eh?" he said hoarsely, twisting his lips with aversion. "Wormy trash?"

"You leave me alone!" blustered Erofei Kuzmich.

Osip Mikhailovich pulled the keys out of his pocket and flung them furiously at Erofei Kuzmich's feet. Then, throwing his stick forward, he limped jerkily in the direction of the stable.

Erofei Kuzmich picked up the keys with a trembling hand. He turned to the crowd. "Well, shall we start dividing?"

"Begin, don't drag it out," Chernyavkin urged.

Anfissa Markovna, who all this time had been observing her kinsman in silence, stepped out of the crowd with a man's stride. Her energetic face

was calm and severe, and her dark, still youthful eyes shone with a strong and steady light. Erofei Kuzmich knew that of late she had become the leader among the women. His heart missed a beat.

"You shouldn't have hurt Osip Mikhailovich like that, kinsman," Anfissa Markovna said in a low but firm voice. "No one will believe that he's saving our property for the Germans. He's put his life-blood into everything you see here in the yard. How could he give it away? Come now, give those keys over."

Erofei Kuzmich handed the keys over in confusion.

"Osip Mikhailovich!" Anfissa Markovna called out. "Come back! Take the keys!"

Thrusting his stick into the mud, the steward obediently started back.

"There won't be any division, kinsman," Anfissa Markovna said brusquely, jangling the keys. "You forget that word." Her eyes sparkled with a clear, youthful light. "Forget it! Our arms will wither away if we start to divide up. You can't tear to pieces what's been built up by our common sweat. Am I right, women?"

The answers came all at once:

"That's right, Anfissa Markovna, that's right."

"We don't want to, and that's all there is to it! That's what we came to say!"

"The idea! A division!"

Osip Mikhailovich came up. Anfissa Markovna stepped forward to meet him. "Take the keys," she said.

Erofei Kuzmich uptilted his beard to the wind. "So the property will go to ruin, kinswoman?"

"Why?"

"Do you think it'll stay untouched?"

"Here it won't," Anfissa Markovna agreed. "If it's left in the granary it'll all be lost. Especially the seed."

"That's just what I'm saying."

"No, it isn't," Anfissa Markovna objected firmly. "We can't leave anything in the granary. We have to distribute it out among everybody for safekeeping this very day. That's the way to do it. Each one of us will hide and save what he can, and when our army returns we'll bring it back here again. For safekeeping only! And everybody will sign receipts for it. Am I right, women?"

There was a flutter in the crowd. Voices of approval arose from it.

"Now that makes sense!" boomed Grandpa Silanty, raising his shoulders up over the crowd.

"What d'you mean, receipts?" Chernyavkin said. baring his teeth. "Who'll we give them to? Osip? Let's divide up and put an end to it."

"Don't you shout, you rotten deserter!" Anfissa Markovna said, advancing on him. "Popped out

like a pimple, have you? Come here to steal the property? Is there a lot of your work in it?"

"I'll take my share. Give me my share, and that's all I ask."

"You won't get a thing!"

"Is that so?" Chernyavkin shouted drunkedly. "Do you want me to show you? Do you?"

Erofei Kuzmich caught him by the sleeve. "Wait a minute, Efim. You're not as drunk as all that. What are you shouting about?"

Blocking off Chernyavkin with his shoulder, Erofei Kuzmich turned to the women. He saw that nothing would come of a division and already regretted his hotheadedness. Once nothing had come of it, he had to cover up his tracks.

"Now, women, why did I talk about dividing up?" he began peacefully, although he was barely able to restrain his anger at Anfissa Markovna. "Because here in the granary everything will be lost. But once it's for safekeeping, that's even better. We'll take it, and then we'll see. Will it take long to drag it back when our army returns? But you see, I couldn't figure that out myself." Here he threw a bit of flattery at his kinswoman. "You've got a fine head on your shoulders, kinswoman. Well, time doesn't wait. Let's get started. We've argued it out, so now let's get down to business. Come on, women."

Relieved, everybody followed Erofei Kuzmich back to the cabin. Osip Mikhailovich limped along

in the rear, jangling his keys. Thinking about Anfissa Markovna, he whispered to himself:

"My, but she's strong! Yes, strong!"

XII

Trees change in different ways in autumn. Some retain their colour a long time. The sun's rays lose their warmth, the winds rage and frosts grip the earth, yet the leaves live on stubbornly, without changing the rich green of summer; slowly, oh so slowly, do the autumnal tints appear! With other trees it is different. No sooner does autumn usher in inclement weather than they suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, turn yellow and come fluttering down to the ground.

That was how it was with Marika.

After she learned about Andrei's death an immediate change, both outward and inward, took place in her. Until then she had still seemed a mere girl. She had bustled about the house always performing her duties with a vivacious skill, lightheartedly. Now all that was as if it had never been. She had become a woman—still very young—but like all women, especially when assailed by grief, quiet and reserved. She moved about slowly and spoke in a low voice. Now, against her pallid skin, her full lips and black eyes stood out even more sharply.

She had grown strongly attached to Andrei's home. Everything about it had become near and dear to her: the house itself, with its sky-blue shutters, the spacious yard over which the pigeons circled, the glowing white birches, the pale asters in the little front garden.... But now she was quickly developing an antipathy for all this.

Marika knew that the reason for this antipathy was not that Andrei had been killed and that without him she was becoming a superfluous stranger in the house. It had all begun with that trip to the battlefield with Erofei Kuzmich. She could not bear to talk to her father-in-law. During the period of bad weather she observed him and his doings with new eyes, and she saw that he was becoming a totally different person. The changes in Erofei Kuzmich both disgusted and frightened her.

With each passing day Marika felt more and more out of place in the Lopukhov house. This feeling established a bond between her and the others who were also strangers in the Lopukhov house, Loznevoi and Kostya. She frequently sat with them in the best room, talking, the way people do in their grief, about minor things.

Loznevoi, however, interpreted this in his own way. "Life is taking its course," he thought. "She'll grieve a little more, and then youth will claim its own...." This thought set him on fire. From day

to day he became more talkative with Marika and persistently sought an opportunity to be alone with her.

XIII

At noon Erofei Kuzmich drove up with several sacks of seed grain. Inwardly he cursed Anfissa Markovna for all he was worth, although at the same time he consoled himself. "The devil with that receipt!" he thought. "The important thing is to get my hands on something before it's too late."

He was met in the yard by Alevtina Vassilievna, who had come out to feed the chickens. Wrapping her shawl tighter around her and picking up the skirts of her worn old coat, she padded slowly over to the cart.

"Got much?" she asked.

"Everything you see here," Erofei Kuzmich answered roughly, hitching the light-grey horse he had recently brought back from the grove. "I had all I could do to get even that. That kinswoman, damn her liver, can do anything she wants with the women, and they follow her like sheep. Damn that devil's tribe! She didn't let us divide up. And those women—they used to howl enough to make you deaf. But now they seem to have gone crazy; they've dug into that kolkhoz like ticks and you can't tear them away from it. That's what your kind is like!"

Alevtina Vassilievna gave a soft sigh.

"Well, all right, the devil take them!" Erofei Kuzmich walked up to the cart and felt one of the sacks. "Now we have seed. At least my mind's at ease. Only we have to hide it well. They may come any day now. Where's Marika?"

"At home. Where else?"

"With them again, I suppose?"

"They're playing cards."

"Ha, so she's playing already!" Erofei Kuzmich exclaimed maliciously. "Too soon! It's her damned family! She'll take after her mother. And tell me, if you don't mind, why does she hang around with those good-for-nothings, eh?"

Alevtina Vassilievna waved her hand feebly at her husband. "Starting a row again! Do you want her to sit by herself and pine away? As it is she doesn't look like herself any more. It takes her mind off things a bit."

"There's work to be done, and not her mind taken off things! She's stopped doing anything at all, and you support her!"

"What's there special for her to do?"

"Huh, talk to you! A hole has to be dug, that's what!"

When she heard her father-in-law in the house, Marika scooped up the cards from the table and walked over to the window. Erofei Kuzmich threw

open the door of the best room and said, without entering:

"You ought to come out and help! Or don't you see that I've come back? There's so much work to do I haven't got a chance to catch my breath. A hole has to be dug for the seed, and I still have to go back to the granary again. I'm run off my feet!"

Without saying a word to her father-in-law Marika took her shawl and walked out of the room. At the same moment Loznevoi rose from the table. He treated his host with marked respect and strove to please him in every possible way.

"Look here, Erofei Kuzmich," he said, moving toward the door, "is there anything we can do to help you? Dig a hole?"

"Yes," he muttered.

"What else?"

"Well, saw boards for it."

"We'll do it, Erofei Kuzmich," Loznevoi promised. "Get ready, Kostya. I feel all right now, and it's time we did some work in the fresh air. All you have to do, Erofei Kuzmich, is show us where to dig and which boards to use."

"So you feel better?"

"I'm all right now."

"Well, thank God!"

"I'm ready," Kostya said. "We're used to d-digging. We've done plenty of it this year. It doesn't

pay to get out of the habit; maybe we'll have to do some more."

They went out into the yard and quickly carried the sacks of grain to the barn. Erofei Kuzmich showed them where to dig inside the shed and the boards that had to be sawed to line the hole. Then he took Vasyatka and went off to the kolkhoz yard again. this time to receive implements for safekeeping.

"What a b-boss!" Kostya shook his head. "He rakes in everything he c-can lay hands on. Give a man like him a free hand and he'll swell up in a minute, like a s-spider."

"Stop knocking our host!" Loznevoi said irritably.

"I'm not knocking him—but I ought to."

"Stop it. I'm fed up!"

Kostya was silent for a while. Then he said to Marika, "You go on home. There's one spade, and there's only room for one person to dig anyway."

"Then look," Loznevoi said. "You dig and she and I will go and saw the boards. Where's the saw?"

A north wind blowing since early morning had dispersed the cover of fog hanging over the drab, muddy earth, and a pale sun had come out. After several days of bad weather visibility had increased; the summits of low hills, the tops of fir forests, and circles of deciduous woods among the fields, spot-

ted with dull gold, came into view again. It was as if the countryside were emerging from non-existence following an exhausting struggle with the elements, retaining barely perceptible traces of its former beauty and without a hint of regeneration—emerging to warm itself a little in the sun.

Loznevoi was overjoyed at this first opportunity to be alone with Marika for some time. He dragged the boards to the sawhorse in the corner of the yard, and eagerly got down to work. He sawed jerkily and crookedly, however. He puffed as he worked, his thin nostrils dilating, and his lean face with its little Tatar beard quickly broke into a sweat.

"Better take a rest," Marika soon suggested. "You make a poor sawyer."

"But I never intended to be one, Marika," Loznevoi replied. After a momentary pause he suddenly began to speak about himself, something he had never done before. "To tell the truth, I've always dreamed about unusual occupations. The dreaming was easy, but acquiring the knowledge was hard. And so I didn't get anywhere before I went into the army. And when I landed in the army I got it into my head that I was made for a military man. But it turned out that that profession wasn't easy to acquire either. Fate has its laws, as you know. And now, as you see, my army career is finished."

"Why finished?"

"That's fate."

Leaning on the sawhorse, he looked into Marika's face.

"You know, Marika," he went on significantly, "there's a splendid saying in the Koran: 'Everything that is going to happen to you is written down in the Book of Life, and the wind of eternity turns the pages at random.' And so the wind is turning the pages of my life. Turning them fast." He lowered his head. "Do you remember how you wished me good luck?"

"I did, but it hasn't come to you."

"Why not?" Loznevoi objected. "After all, I wasn't killed, and I could have been. Besides, sometimes what seems a failure can turn out to be a big success after a while. Remember the little talk we had by the stream? I think that was also written down on one of the pages in my Book of Life. The wind turned a couple of pages, I landed in Olkhovka, and you rescued me—"

Marika rattled the saw and interrupted him. "Let's get to work."

But Loznevoi continued. "If I could only know what comes further in that book." His left cheek twisted into a smile. "Do you know, Marika?"

"Start sawing! I don't even know anything about myself."

As yet Marika had no idea what Loznevoi was driving at, but the very fact that now, when they were alone, his tone was entirely different from the one he used in the house, put her on her guard. Without looking at him she began to press hard on the saw and pull it sharply, sprinkling sawdust on the hem of her skirt. Every time she turned her head Loznevoi caught a glimpse of the dark flash of her eyes under their lowered lashes.

Bowed down by grief, Marika had not paid much attention to Loznevoi and had had no inkling of his feelings for her. Now she guessed, and this filled her with distaste for him and with a vague uneasiness.

They sawed two boards in silence. When he had put the third one on the sawhorse it occurred to Loznevoi that Erofei Kuzmich might return soon, and he started to talk again, almost in a whisper, "Listen, Marika, why did you rescue me?"

"Go to hell!" Marika suddenly shouted. She threw down the saw and ran into the vegetable garden.

Marika stood by the mountain ash a long time, trying to understand why the conversation with Loznevoi had upset her so, and trying to put her finger on some disturbing thoughts that kept flitting by elusively, like spider threads in the sunshine....

XIV

In the evening Marika went to see her mother. Anfissa Markovna looked at her closely and was struck: how she had changed in the past few days! She sat down and pressed her cheek to her daughter's shoulder.

"Why, daughter, you're just a shadow."

"You know, Mama," Marika began, straightening the shawl on her shoulders—for some reason she wore it often now, although she was not afraid of the cold. "You know, that officer said he saw Andrei dying under a fir tree, and I myself saw how many men were killed there. . . ." She gazed sadly into the dim far corner of the room. "But why doesn't my heart tell me he's dead? When I sit quiet and listen to it, it doesn't say so. He said Andrei was very close to death. But did he die? You know yourself what Andrei is like. He could have fought down death and crawled away. . . ."

Anfissa Markovna rose.

"We'll have to see what the beans say, daughter."

"Will it be true?"

"Why, daughter, it will all be as true as can be! Faya, get me the beans."

"Right away." Faya ran to the cupboard in the corner. "They tell the whole truth, everything! Just wait, Marika, you'll see for yourself!"

"To tell the truth, that's what I came for," Mari-

ka confessed. "I never used to believe in it, but now I keep thinking that maybe they really are right."

Life those days was difficult. The war had taken away many husbands, brothers and sons. Everybody knew that their loved ones walked daily in the shadow of death, and nobody ever received any word from them. One thing remained: fortunetelling. And that autumn many visited the fortunetellers, about whom they had completely forgotten in recent years.

In Olkhovka a crabbed old woman named Zubachikha had begun to tell fortunes in the summer. She told extremely gloomy fortunes, usually prophesying bad things, and made everybody cry. But recently, to everybody's surprise, Anfissa Markovna had begun to tell fortunes, with beans. Her prophecies were always cheerful. The women quickly turned from Zubachikha to Anfissa Markovna and began to gather around her even more willingly than before. Anfissa Markovna foretold a quick end to the war, the return of relatives in complete health, good changes in life—in a word everything the women dreamed about, and hence they placed utter faith in her fortunetelling.

Anfissa Markovna sat down at the table and scattered a handful of varicoloured beans over the cloth. Smoothing her dark hair and compressing her lips, she instantly assumed a stern, concentrated expression. Her daughters sat quietly on either side

of her. The flame flickered in the small lamp without a chimney. It was dusky in the room. Outside the wind was blowing in noisy gusts and the shutters were creaking.

"Wish," Anfissa Markovna said, moving one of the beans toward her daughter.

Marika closed her hand around the bean and sighed. "I've made my wish long ago."

"Put it down here."

There was a knock on the door. Lukeria Boyarkina came in. "Oh, I'm in time!" she exclaimed from the doorway the minute she saw that Anfissa Markovna was telling fortunes. "I put the children to sleep and came right over. Anfissa Markovna, tell me why my heart's been aching all day long. It aches and aches, and everywhere I go I think about Stepan. As though something's going to happen."

"But I told you your fortune the day before yesterday," Anfissa Markovna said, shuffling the beans.

"What of it? Two days have passed."

"Then sit down and wait a while."

Lukeria sat down next to Marika. "They tell everything—the honest truth!" she whispered into her ear.

"Quiet. I've started," Anfissa Markovna said.

First she divided the beans into three heaps. and then each of them into three again; now there were two, three or four beans in each. She gazed at the beans sternly, crinkling her brows, as though

struggling to make out what they foretold. Before she had a chance to utter a word her faithful assistant in the fortunetelling, the black-eyed Faya, jumped up and shouted:

"He's alive! Marika, he's alive!"

Marika cast a burning glance over the occupants of the room. "Alive?"

"Yes, he's alive, alive!" Faya insisted.

"Can't you see?" her mother said sternly. "Look—here he is!" She poked her finger at one of the heaps of beans. "He's alive. And he's on the road. Here's the road." She pointed to another heap of beans. "Well, there's no need to hide the truth, he isn't having an easy time of it. He's worried—worried about home. Here, look."

"That's nothing." Marika said in a barely audible voice. "If only he's alive."

Shielding her eyes against the light with her hand. she stared into the corner of the room, where a cricket also seemed to be chanting, "Alive, alive." "Andrei," she thought. "My darling, the light of my life."

"Now tell mine too," Lukeria begged. "I just can't wait. Just find out if he's alive and if he'll return."

"Why bother with fortunetelling?" a man's voice suddenly came from the top of the stove. "He'll soon return."

Marika and Lukeria froze in fright at the table.

Anfissa Markovna turned to the stove. "So you couldn't wait, you frozen cabbage? Warmed up and come to life? Well, climb down, everybody here is all right." To Lukeria and Marika she explained: "That's Serga Hakhai. Didn't you recognize his voice?"

Serga Hakhai, in a dirty undershirt and wrinkled trousers smeared with brick dust climbed down from the ledge above the stove, holding a blue silk tobacco pouch. Anfissa Markovna handed him his felt boots. "I wouldn't have spoken up," he said as he put them on, "only I wanted a smoke. I've been sniffing at the pouch a long time now."

"Serga, Serga!" Lukeria cried, barely able to collect herself. "Where have you come from? Where's my husband?"

"Wait a minute, let me light up."

"Tell me, tell me!"

"You had your fortune told, didn't you?" Serga grinned, his walleye flashing.

"Well, what if I did?"

"What did the beans tell you?"

"They said he's alive, but they don't say where he is."

"Clever beans," Serga remarked, walking up to the table. "They know all about military security. I'll tell you the same thing: he's alive, and he sends you his best. But where he is I won't say, even though you're his wife."

He winked mischievously at the women and, bending his straw-coloured forelock over the table, brought the end of his cigarette to the flame of the little lamp.

XV

Loznevoi was chopping dry stalks of home-grown tobacco on a board on the table, while Kostya screened. Erofei Kuzmich had excellent tobacco; it was famous all over the village. The invisible dust tickled the men's nostrils.

Kostya wrinkled his nose. "It certainly has a bite! Takes after its owner, and that's the truth!" Nowadays he stammered less. "Should we try some of the fresh stuff?"

"Let's."

They lit up. It was early morning. The Lopukhovs were busy out in the yard. Inside the house it was quiet.

Kostya broke out coughing and clutched at his chest. "Oh mother of mine! Why, it just scrapes away at your insides. What d-damed stuff. Just like its owner, by God!"

"Why do you keep knocking him all the time?" Loznevoi asked. "All peasants are like that."

"Take me—I'm a peasant. From the loneliest village you could find. Am. I like that?"

"No, but you will be."

"Never. I'm not that kind."

Loznevoi puffed leisurely at his cigarette. "What don't you like about our host? He feeds us. Well, what?"

"Everything, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

"Forget that rank," Loznevoi said irritably. "How many times have I told you?"

"It keeps slipping my mind," Kostya said in confusion. "I've got used to it."

The habits of army life clung firmly to Kostya. He rose early, neatly made his bed, kept his uniform tidy, shined his shoes and shaved frequently, although only a scanty fuzz grew on his boyish cheeks. It was as though he considered himself still in the service and obliged to carry out its laws to the letter. The swelling on his face had subsided and his right eye had opened up again, although the entire area around it was discoloured. He seemed to mature from day to day; less and less frequently did his face break into an artless youthful smile.

"What don't you like about him?" Loznevoi repeated.

"Everything!" Kostya replied with unexpected sharpness. "There's a kind of grass in the fields—sow thistle. Ever seen it? If you plough and harrow a field properly it can't be seen. But just stop t-taking care of the field and out it p-pops. Where it gets its strength is beyond me. It springs up, spreads out and chokes everything."

"And Erofei Kuzmich is like that?"

"Exactly! Like that sow thistle."

Loznevoi stood up, pulled his shirt straight and picked up the knife again. He was about to resume cutting the tobacco but stopped and cast an angry glance at Kostya.

"Have you seen any other peasants lately? In the places where there's no more Soviet power? If you had you wouldn't talk like that about Erofei Kuzmich. They're all like that, those peasants, all of them!"

Kostya gave a smile that was almost defiant.

"Have you seen them lately yourself? How do you know they're like that?" Kostya was beginning to argue more and more boldly with his former battalion commander. "How do you know?"

"I know them!" Loznevoi waved his knife, twisting his left cheek into a mirthless smile. "I've seen them. They lived in kolkhozes but they kept wishing they were farming on their own. And you see what happens now? As soon as there's no more Soviet power they come crawling out. They're all like your sow thistle, old man. No matter how you work the land you can't root them out. No!" He stepped nearer to Kostya. "And keep in mind, old man, keep in mind." He waved the knife in front of Kostya's face, "Keep in mind that there's loads of them like our Erofei Kuzmich. That's the terrible part of it. They've come out into the open not only here, where the Germans are. They're raising their

heads now in the rear too, along the Volga and in Siberia. That's the terrible part of it!"

Kostya blinked his thin blond lashes, laboriously pondering over what Loznevoi had said. Several times he opened his mouth to speak, although he did not know what he was going to say, but Loznevoi kept interrupting him.

"Well, what do you say to that?" he asked, waving the knife. "What do you say to that?"

Before Kostya had a chance to reply footsteps sounded in the kitchen. Then the door opened and Marika came in.

"Ah, Marika!" Loznevoi exclaimed, both happy and embarrassed. He did not know how to talk to her after their tiff of the previous day. "Been at your mother's?"

"Yes."

That morning, whether from the wind or for some other reason, Marika's face was brighter than it had been for a long time. A pink glow suffused her cheeks. Around her shoulders lay her dark little shawl. Again, as during their first meeting, it struck Loznevoi that he had seen her somewhere long, long before.

"Come over here," Loznevoi said tenderly.

Marika sat down on the bench. Loznevoi and Kostya seated themselves on either side of her.

"Missed me?" she asked in the mischievous tone of her girlhood, with a grin.

Loznevoi rejoiced. "Why, of course!" he rejoined in the same bantering tone. "You're looking more cheerful today, Marika," he remarked.

"Can't expect me to cry all the time."

"Of course not. You'd just fade away if you went on suffering like that."

"Don't talk about that," Marika said.

"Why should you fade away?" Loznevoi persisted.

"Stop that!" Marika said in a sharper tone.

Erofei Kuzmich's grumbling voice came from the kitchen. The three immediately fell silent, listening. One of the kitchen floor boards creaked.

"He's coming here," Marika whispered.

Erofei Kuzmich entered the room, drying his work-worn hands which he had just washed. He walked up to the mirror. "Where's the comb?" he asked Marika, without turning to look at her.

"Behind the mirror."

Erofei Kuzmich spent a long time on his beard, painstakingly combing it out to the sides and upwards. Marika instantly guessed that her father-in-law had something on his mind. Erofei Kuzmich put the comb back behind the mirror.

"Yes, I'm getting old, getting old," he remarked to no one in particular.

"Sit down and have a smoke, Erofei Kuzmich," Loznevoi suggested obsequiously. "That's good tobacco you've got."

"No time to sit down," Erofei Kuzmich replied without looking at anybody. "No time to go wandering about at night, or to wag my tongue, either."

Erofei Kuzmich had been growing more and more vexed with Marika. Her intimacy with Loznevoi and Kostya of late irritated him beyond measure. But he had kept his silence: too little time had passed since the news of Andrei's death. and he realized that it would not be fitting to quarrel with his daughter-in-law. Now, however, he could contain his anger no longer.

"We bend our backs in toil all our lives," he growled, glancing around quickly. "We have no time for pleasure."

Marika rose from the table. "What has to be done?"

"There's plenty of work in the house."

"What kind?"

"You have to be shown everything! You ought to see it yourself." He lowered his voice. "You've started to play around too soon. Too soon!"

Marika leaned toward her father-in-law.

"You mean me?"

Erofei Kuzmich also leaned forward. "Go ahead! Go ahead! Claw out my eyes! That's just like you Logovas. All you—"

"That's enough, Erofei Kuzmich," Loznevoi interrupted pleadingly.

"What do you mean that's enough? Who am I here?"

"It's not nice—"

"Have a smoke, better," Kostya suggested. "Some tobacco! Has it got a bite!"

"I know. It takes after me!"

Marika walked over to the window. She straightened the shawl on her shoulders and looked out over the flowers into the street. The weather was tightening up. The sky was clearing and turning an even frosty blue. Pigeons were circling above the village.

Erofei Kuzmich sat down at the table.

"Well, how do you feel. Better?"

"Getting along," Loznevoi replied evasively.

"Well, comrade army men, tell me: don't you think I want to go on living?" Erofei Kuzmich braced his hands on his knees. "Yes, that's right. But they'll chop off my head soon! Of course, life now isn't worth a kopeck, but I've gotten used to it and I don't want to go to my grave yet. I'm getting old, but still I don't want to. I'd like to live to see good times. But it looks as if I won't have the chance."

"What's happened?" Loznevoi asked.

"Look, it's tightening up." Erofei Kuzmich nodded toward the window at which Marika was standing. "Now we can expect the Germans. Especially after that fire. And when they come I'll be the first

to have his head chopped off—the first. The whole village knows you're living in my house—and they're that kind of people. You know yourself, I didn't say a word to you. I've been keeping you and feeding you and giving you everything you need as long as I could. After all, you're our own kind; not relations, to be sure, but brothers under the skin. I'll tell you the truth: I'm afraid. It would be different if they didn't know in the village, if you'd come to me in secret—then I'd take the risk and hide you. But everybody knows it. All I do now when I walk through the village is look at the birches and wonder which one I'm going to hang from. What should we do? Think it over."

"We'll go away," Kostya declared resolutely. "We'll go away, and that'll be the end of it. Then you can live in peace."

"I'm not chasing you, but it wants thinking over. All right, so they string me up on a birch tree. But do you think they'll let you go free? It's you I'm thinking about. There's only one thing for you to do now, and that's go into hiding. Like it or not, they'll give you away here in the village. There's people who'll do that. So think it over."

Erofei Kuzmich rose and left the room without waiting for his unwelcome boarders to tell him their final decision.

The moment he was gone, Marika turned away from the window and quickly walked up to Loz-

nevoi and Kostya. Glancing at the door, she said in an excited whisper:

"Leave! Go to the partisans!"

Kostya caught Marika by the sleeve. "The p-partisans? Where are they? Tell me!"

"I don't know," Marika whispered, afraid that the door would open again. "That I don't know. But I can take you to a man who's going out there, to them." She waved her hand in the direction of the window. "He's from there."

XVI

All the flour mills in the locality were out of commission. The villagers had nothing for it but to make hand mills; the grinding of millstones was to be heard in almost every house from morning to night. The Lopukhovs kept their mill in the storeroom. This room was shrouded in twilight almost all the time. Against one wall stood a flour bin, and along the other various tubs and baskets filled with hops and guelder-rose; from the ceiling hung bunches of bast and flax, steppe wormwood and wild thyme. In the quiet and dark corners of the storeroom mice frisked about freely; even when the mill was working their squeaking could often be heard.

"Pour in some more!" Kostya said to Loznevoi in an irritable tone he had never used before, notic-

ing that the stream of flour in the trough was thinning out again.

"Wait, Kostya. Take a rest."

"What damned work! I hope he chokes on this flour!" Kostya spat in disgust. "What a skinflint the son-of-a-bitch is!"

"But I tell you they're all like that."

"I haven't seen that kind since 1930." Kostya leaned over the bin. "No, I can't!"

"Tired so soon? All right, I'll turn."

"I can't go on living like this," Kostya explained.

Loznevoi also leaned over the bin. "Listen, old man, you were never like this. Why can't you go on?"

"What kind of life is it?"

From behind the bin came the pattering and squeaking of mice. When they had quieted down Kostya went on.

"Like these mice. How is it any better?"

Loznevoi gripped Kostya's arm.

"That's enough! Let's grind some more."

Kostya poured some grain into the funnel and Loznevoi bent over the handle. The stone began to turn with a grinding noise. A warm stream of flour trickled down the trough.

"Stop! I can't!" Kostya said. "What have you decided?" he asked softly, leaning his elbows on the mill. "To go?"

"To the partisans?"

"Yes."

"Listen, Kostya." Loznevoi took Kostya by the shoulders and placed him in front of him. "Tell me, old man, what did we grind yesterday?"

"Wheat."

"And today?"

"Well, rye."

Loznevoi shook Kostya, trying to make him smile. "But it all comes out flour just the same. Understand, old man?"

"You mean everything will t-turn out all right—anyway? But will it be soon?"

"Maybe not. Who knows? We have to bide our time even if it means living like mice. The one thing we know now is that the Germans are right near Moscow. That's where."

"So it won't be soon," Kostya said. "Until the army gets its strength together and comes back here.... It'll take a long time, like grinding with this mill."

"But maybe it won't. It isn't likely our army will get any strength together, Kostya. Where from?"

A bar of pale autumn sunlight fell through the small window, over which hung bunches of dry herbs, and lit up Kostya's face. Loznevoi saw the bright, boyish features suddenly harden into firm, manly lines.

"What will happen?" he asked in a low voice.

Loznevoi was puzzled by this abrupt change in Kostya's face. Now he bore no resemblance to the lad who as his orderly had done his bidding promptly and with boyish eagerness.

"What will happen?" Kostya repeated in a still lower voice.

"What? The Germans will smash us—that's all!"

"Us?"

"They'll take Moscow now, and that'll be the end of us!"

Kostya drew his lips into a thin line. He fixed a cold, unwavering gaze on Loznevoi.

"Was that what you were thinking about all the time we were retreating?"

"Yes," Loznevoi admitted.

Still staring fixedly at Loznevoi, Kostya lunged out with sudden fury and caught him under the ribs with his fist. Taken by surprise, Loznevoi cried out and fell back against the baskets of hops and guelder-rose. Kostya threw himself at his former battalion commander and dug his fingers into his throat, yelping like a wolf cub. They grappled long and furiously, crashing against the tubs, empty pails, troughs and sundry other articles.

XVII

At first glance a tangled skein of thread may seem easy to unravel. But a tug at one thread will snarl the skein still more, and with the second pull

it becomes clear that the snarl can never be disentangled.

Just such a hopeless tangle was Vladimir Loznevoi's life. He himself could not see this, however.

An only son, he had been spoiled by his loving father. Like all parents, Mikhail Alexandrovich Loznevoi, a land surveyor, had always felt that his son held great promise, was destined to be an outstanding personality. His imagination soared to poetic heights when he pictured Vladimir's future. When he presented the thin, unsociable boy with the big nose and blond forelock to guests, he always exclaimed with pride:

"See what an eagle I have? I can assure you that his lot will be different from mine!" Then, with a tug at the boy's hair, "He's going to be a great man. Aren't you, son?"

"Yes, Papa," Vladimir would answer precisely.

Nor were the guests, of course, sparing in praise of Vladimir. "A wonderful boy!" they would exclaim. "Just look at his expression!" or, "Yes, you can see at a glance he's a clever boy."

Mikhail Alexandrovich had himself dreamed of performing great and noble deeds for the people. It was just for this reason that he had become a land surveyor. He lived with his family in a small town on the Volga. From early spring until late into the autumn he drove about the lonely Russian

and Tatar villages along the Volga, but never had he been able to perform the great and noble deeds of his dreams. All his energies had gone into petty affairs connected with the lands of the peasant communes. He carefully divided the level fields along the Volga into small lots, and he saw how these strips of land brought nothing but hardships to people; he saw how much bitter toil the peasants spent on them to earn their daily bread; he saw men with a love of the land in their blood curse these strips in despair. So at last it happened that the old surveyor came to hate his profession, because he realized that he had only been helping to further an evil from which the countryside had suffered for centuries.

It was just at this period that Mikhail Alexandrovich, who made frequent and prolonged absences from home, noticed that Vladimir was growing into a young man and that the time had come to help him to prepare for an independent life.

"You see how it is, Vladimir?" he remarked to his son one evening from the depths of his old armchair, expelling clouds of smoke into the twilight of the room. "Don't make my mistake. Choose something that will bring the greatest good to the people. If you choose the right profession you will always be happy. Why not become a doctor?" For a second Mikhail Alexandrovich pulled himself up in enthusiasm. "You don't want to? That's a pity!

The labours of a doctor—there you have noble and selfless service to the people, a life of struggle for their health and happiness. What could be better?"

When kolkhozes were set up in the villages he had grown to know so well in the course of his life, and tractor ploughs broke down the boundaries he had laid out, the old surveyor rejoiced greatly. Soon he began to receive genuine and unexpected satisfaction from the profession he had hated. Now he surveyed huge kolkhoz tracts, and he issued to the kolkhozes state deeds securing to them the use of the land in perpetuity. He felt that he had consummated his work with a great achievement.

Vladimir Loznevoi knew nothing about this, however. He thought that his father had died an unhappy and dissatisfied man. He did not know because a big rift had arisen between him and his father at that time.

Since he had grown up from childhood with the thought of a lofty career always before him, Vladimir Loznevoi was afraid of just one thing: that he might ruin his career by making an unfortunate choice, as his father had done. During his first semester at Kazan University he changed departments three times. Finally he realized that he could never be tempted by the prospect of spending his life like a wanderer, in search of mineral wealth in remote places, or of telling children the story of the apple that had led Newton to make his great dis-

covery, or of spending days and nights conjuring with test tubes in a laboratory. All that was too petty for him. Occupied with a search for his true calling, Loznevoi of course neglected to do any studying. As a result, he was expelled from the university at the end of the year for failing to make the grade.

His father was deeply hurt and wrote him an angry letter.

Loznevoi was now forced to go on his own. For six years he roved about the country in search of "the real thing." Meanwhile he accepted work that was not too burdensome and paid as well as could be expected. His comrades who had graduated from the university were busy teaching children, searching for hidden wealth in the earth for the benefit of the nation, or working in industrial laboratories. But he, Vladimir Loznevoi, was at first manager of a wandering troupe of sleight-of-hand artists and acrobats, then an agent purchasing hoops, staves and tanbark for a manufacturing organization. The latter offered opportunities for making easy money. Later he taught dancing at a small club....

Grandiose deeds were being accomplished in the country, but he had cut himself off from them. The entire nation was leading a life of intensive and united effort, but he had unobtrusively excluded himself from this life. Finally the time came when he real-

ized he would never become a great man. Conceit prevented him from acknowledging himself to be the only one to blame for his failure. He hastened to explain it by saying that a man of outstanding ability could never find recognition in a country where a single idea and the will of the collective dominated.

"What can such a country accomplish?" he would ask himself, twitching his left cheek into a sneer. "One good blow and the whole thing will crumble to dust!"

Two years before the war, after one of his short-term periods of obligatory military service, he was invited to remain in the army as an officer. He had long since grown weary of roaming about. Besides, it suddenly struck him that he might go far as a military man.

But in the army, too, Loznevoi was secretly dissatisfied. When the war began he said to himself, "Now it will all come crashing down!"

XVIII

A young crane stood on a hummock; its right wing drooped to the ground. In the east a pale autumn dawn was slowly breaking. The crane mournfully surveyed its bleak, unfamiliar surroundings—a bumpy swamp spotted with clusters of scraggly birches, reeds and marsh grass. In sum-

mer this would have been a fine place to live: it had an abundance of water and grass and all kinds of crawling things. But now the swamp and everything in it lay motionless, locked in the grip of the cold. The wind rustled the dry, frozen grass. The deserted swamp struck terror into the crane's heart in that hour of dawn. It hopped to another hummock, and then to a third, trailing its crippled wing. Halting, it again threw a lost, forlorn look around, recalled the flock with which it had been flying to warm lands, and sent a piteous cry out over the swamp: *kourlee-ee, kourlee.*

"Has it fallen behind?" Kostya asked.

"Yes, it looks hurt," Serga Hakhai said. "It'll die here. We have heavy frosts."

They were walking from Olkhovka to the west. Both wore sheepskin jackets, fur hats and sturdy boots. Each had a heavy bundle over his shoulder. The wind stung their faces. While they were walking past the swamp they heard the crane send up several more pitiful cries. "It'll die," Kostya thought. All of a sudden he felt unbearably sorry for the poor crane. He recalled his little village on the Kama, his father and mother, his younger sisters, their house under the shaggy pine. He had not stepped over the threshold for three years now. "I've fallen behind too, and I might just as well cry out like that crane," Kostya thought with a sick feeling.

They walked about a kilometre in silence. After they had passed the swamp Kostya caught up with Serga Hakhai, who was walking along with big strides. "Do you know where our men are buried? Those who were shot?"

"Yes. Not far from here."

They came to the place. The grave was banked up with sod, and a low single-rail fence had been hastily put up around it. Nothing had been erected to mark the nameless grave.

"They lost their lives because of me," Kostya announced in a gloomy voice. "On the way to Olkhovka the Germans told us: if one of you runs away we'll shoot t-ten of you. It's on account of me! That's certain." He sighed and shifted the bundle on his back. "So that's how it turned out! I am guilty before these men."

Hat in hand, Kostya stood motionless at the fence for a long time. He knew many of the prisoners in the column. "I wonder who is here?" he thought. "If I only knew! And there, at home, somebody is waiting for them.... The war will end, and they'll still be waiting. And their wives and kids will never see them again...." Suddenly Kostya fell to his knees and clasped the fence post with both hands. His face twitched.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "Oh, forgive me!"

He raised his eyes and shouted, shaking the post:

"I'll avenge you! All of you! We'll scatter their bones over our land! They'll hate the very sun, hate it, hate it!"

Serga Hakhai seized Kostya by the shoulder.

"Stop! Stop! What's the matter with you?"

Kostya continued to stare at the grave for another minute, as though he did not realize where he was. Serga Hakhai put Kostya's hat on his head and again tried to tear him from the post.

"Wait," said Kostya. "I'll get up by myself...."

Out on the road Hakhai shook his head. "A hot fellow you are!"

By the time the sun was up they were in Elk Forest. As they walked through the forest a new feeling came to Kostya. He could not exactly put his finger on it, but somehow it made him feel better. It was an old and dense forest. Mossy, venerable firs lined the cart track, spreading their thick dark branches over it. Their lofty tips swayed to and fro in the wind, but down below, on the mossy forest floor with its pattern of ferns, all was quiet and motionless. The fir trunks lined the track like a palisade, without a single break. The forest was just like those along the Kama. "It's one and the same land everywhere," flashed through Kostya's mind, "and all of it is ours."

In the heart of the forest they were met by a partisan patrol. Then they emerged into a big clearing, and Kostya saw a forester's hut with a moss-

covered roof and shutters hanging every which way. Serga Hakhai explained that the partisans had taken over this hut. Now Kostya suddenly realized that a new life was beginning for him, and that the pleasant feeling he had had on the way came from the anticipation that this new life was soon to begin.

The hut was crowded. On a table in the corner two men in uniform were taking apart and cleaning a machine gun. "Oh, army men!" Kostya rejoiced. "It's clear they're old hands at it." Beside them a tall, lean man in glasses, who looked like a village schoolteacher, was carefully packing away his things into a hunter's knapsack. Two girls in simple tailored suits were whispering near the window as they examined a telephone apparatus. At another table a heavy-set young man in driver's overalls was telling two teen-age boys in a loud voice how to use a hand grenade. The only one to pay any attention to Serga Hakhai and Kostya was a broad-shouldered fellow, apparently an acquaintance of Hakhai's, who seized him by the shoulder just as they entered.

"So you've come? Well, how are things there?"

"I'll tell you later."

Stepan Boyarkin rose from the table in the near corner. His thin, sickly face was covered with thick lather.

"Aha, wanderer, so you've turned up?" he said

curtly, but with a note of joy in his voice. "March over here. Why so long?"

"Business," answered Hakhai.

"I know all about you and your business. Probably your Ksenia wouldn't let you go, eh?"

"There's a comrade with me," Hakhai announced as he shook Boyarkin's hand. He glanced backward. "Come here."

"Who's that?" Boyarkin asked.

With an embarrassed air Kostya began to tell about himself. The other partisans drew up around the table.

"Have you any papers on you?" Boyarkin asked.

"Sa-ay," Serga drawled, "what kind of papers could he have?"

"Why not?" Kostya cast an injured glance at Hakhai. "I have my papers with me."

"Which?"

"Different kinds. I have my Komsomol card."

"Let's see it."

Kostya looked around at the partisans in embarrassment.

"Lost it?" Boyarkin smiled ironically.

"Oh, all right!" Kostya said with resolution. He opened his sheepskin jacket and began to unbutton his trousers.

"Just where do you keep your papers?" Boyarkin asked with a broad grin.

"See where?"

"Well, may I be struck down by thunder!" Serga exclaimed. He laughed until he had to hold his sides. "So that's where he's hidden them!"

Everyone else began to laugh.

"What are you laughing about?" Kostya said in a hurt voice. "What's the joke? Maybe I didn't have any other place that was safe! Damn that button!"

"All right, all right," Boyarkin said, still grinning. "Go over to the stove and warm your hands. You'll get it out later. I'll finish shaving and then we'll have a talk. March over to the stove!"

"Yes!" Kostya answered joyfully in the precise tone he always used in the army.

Serga and Kostya found themselves seats by the stove. Soon Boyarkin joined them. With a coal from the fire he lit his cigarette and then attentively looked over Kostya's papers.

"All in order," he said finally. "Make yourself at home. You'll soon get down to work. This is going to be a big thing. People are gathering in all the forests. Any weapons?"

"No, I haven't."

"You'll find some," Boyarkin said encouragingly.

He pulled another coal out of the stove, held it in his palm while he lit up again, and rose.

"Yes, we'll soon get down to work!" he said thoughtfully.

XIX

There was a clatter of buckets and tubing and strips of tin in the empty shed: Erofei Kuzmich was putting up a still. He was a past master at this. For three days now the house had been filled with the strong, intoxicating odour of mash. The smell made Alevtina Vassilievna feel ill; several times she sent Marika out to learn how Erofei Kuzmich was getting on with the work. Each time he had met her with silence, but then once he asked:

"That good-for-nothing, is he in the house?"

"Where else could he be?"

"Send him here."

It was a pale and worried Loznevoi who reported to the shed. Now that Kostya had gone and he was alone, he sat behind the stove in the best room all day long like a badger in his hole. Poking his thin hooked nose and pointed Tatar beard through the open door, he asked jerkily:

"You called me, Erofei Kuzmich?"

"Come here!"

Loznevoi stepped cautiously into the shed. Erofei Kuzmich lifted his head from behind a vat.

"Haven't left?"

"Where can I go, Erofei Kuzmich?"

"Where'd that one go?"

"Into the forest some place."

"You ought to have gone together. What's the sense in sitting here?"

"I can't," Loznevoi answered, trying to control his trembling lips. "My health is poor. And besides, what kind of partisans can they be? Look at the army we had, and it was smashed. What can the partisans do? Winter will be here soon, and then they'll just break up without even any fighting. It's all the same whether I'm killed in the woods or here."

"Huh! To you it's all the same!" Erofei Kuzmich rose to his feet and leaned on the vat. "But how about me? Did you ever think of that? Do you realize the risk I'm running in keeping you here? They'll kill you. You're a Bolshevik."

"I'm not a Bolshevik," Loznevoi hastened to interrupt.

"Well, you were with them. It's the same thing. Why should I have to pay for it?"

Erofei Kuzmich realized very well that once Loznevoi had not gone with Kostya it meant he would not go at all—and hence was completely in his power. Now he could do whatever he wished with him, treat him any way he liked.

"You get out too! And that's that!" he barked.

Loznevoi's shoulders began to shake. He fell on his knees in front of Erofei Kuzmich and caught at the hem of his coat.

"Erofei Kuzmich! Dear Erofei Kuzmich! Don't kill me! Don't chase me out! Where can I go?"

"Stop that! What are you doing? Let go!"

"Don't chase me out!" Loznevoi whispered, his whole body trembling.

"Well, get up, get up." Erofei Kuzmich sat down on the woodpile. "What am I going to do with you? It's a risk, you know, a risk."

"Maybe—"

"Maybe, maybe!" Erofei Kuzmich interrupted him sharply. "The Germans won't bother to ask questions. If you're a Bolshevik they'll shoot you, and the same if you hid a Bolshevik."

Loznevoi was silent. He stood stooped over in front of Erofei Kuzmich.

"Well, all right," Erofei Kuzmich finally said in a softer tone. "I'll ask everybody to keep quiet about you. I'll tell them I'm saving an army officer. Maybe they won't give you away. Perhaps God will be kind. And so from today on you're my nephew. Get that? You'll be deaf and dumb. Can you do it?"

Loznevoi's lips barely moved. "I can."

"Deaf and dumb. Ever since you were a baby. Now don't forget!" Erofei Kuzmich said firmly as he rose from the woodpile. "Not another single word out of you. You'll work and you'll live here. As my nephew." He ran his eyes over Loznevoi's tall, thin figure as though estimating his worth as a farmhand. "And now go and start carrying over the mash with Marika. It's time to set the still going.

When we finish we'll have a little drink. Like a drink?"

"It would be nice—"

"Here, here!" Erofei Kuzmich shouted. "Forgotten, have you? You're deaf and dumb. Well, like a drink, a drink?" He raised his voice, as one does when talking to the deaf, and lifted an imaginary glass to his lips.

Loznevoi nodded.

"That's right! But your boots—take off your boots!" Erofei Kuzmich shouted again. "Take them off! You'll mess them up with the mash. Put on bast shoes! Bast shoes!" He bent down and went through the motions of tying on bast shoes. "Get it?"

Loznevoi nodded in confusion.

"Looks like things will be all right," Erofei Kuzmich concluded. "Off with you!"

Loznevoi dashed out of the shed.

"That's that," Erofei Kuzmich said softly to himself. "Got a worker for nothing, thank God. Every little bit helps."

...Late in the afternoon the still was set going full blast. A fire licked the bottom of an iron boiler set up on big stones. An iron tube with two bends ran from the boiler to a forty-gallon vat, the top of which was sealed with dough reinforced by strips of cloth. Inside the vat the mash bubbled away noisily, and an intoxicating steam curled up

from under the dough. A straight tube led from the vat to the condenser—a small empty cask standing on a block of wood—and then to the cooling vat. At the very bottom of the cooler was a small outlet with a piece of cloth wrapped around it. From the cloth a pungent whitish liquid trickled into a bottle. The whole apparatus rumbled and burbled and shook. The air around it was smoky and smelled of the mash.

Loznevoi sat silently by the boiler poking the fire with a stick while with fresh dough Marika stopped up the holes in the top of the mash vat through which steam was escaping. Marika was amazed by Loznevoi's refusal to go off to the partisans with Kostya. She could not understand what it meant. All day she had been looking for an opportunity to talk to him about it. Now, beside the still, she brought up the topic again and again, but Loznevoi maintained a stubborn silence, glancing fearfully at the door.

"Why don't you say something?" Marika asked. "Lost your tongue?"

Loznevoi turned to her, his face brightly lit up by the fire. "What can I say now?" he replied in a low voice.

"Why didn't you go?"

Loznevoi threw his stick into the fire. "Oh, Marika! You don't know how hard it is for me! My life is over. I know that everything is finished. And

I'm frightened. I sit beside this still, and I feel as though I were in hell. . . ."

"Be better if you'd gone," Marika remarked. "Even for me it's not easy living here, and you're a total stranger. Why didn't you go?"

Loznevoi covered his face with his hands.

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't. I couldn't make myself."

The door creaked. Erofei Kuzmich entered. He wore a bulky brown sheepskin and a grey dog-fur hat with earlaps. Already from the doorway he noticed that a jet of steam was escaping from the outlet through which the liquor trickled. He rushed over to the still.

"Hey, you! What are you doing? You stuffed monkey you! Break up the fire, quick!"

Frightened out of his wits, Loznevoi began to snatch pieces of burning wood from under the boiler and scatter them all around. The shed grew thick with smoke.

"The minute my back is turned!" Erofei Kuzmich exclaimed. "You could have ruined the whole business."

"Why, what's happened?" Marika asked.

"Don't you see? Why did you put up so much steam? Before you know it the mash could have gone into the bottle, or the pipes smashed to hell. You've got to use your head!"

The still began to gurgle more softly. Erofei Kuzmich grew calmer. He placed an empty bottle under the outlet with the piece of cloth around it and raised the filled one to the level of his eyes.

"Wonder if it's all right."

Seating himself on the woodpile in front of the fire, Erofei Kuzmich took an onion and a teacup with a flowered design from his coat pocket. He filled the cup to the brim with liquor and passed a burning splinter over it. A blue flame danced in the cup.

"It's all right, it'll do!"

As he raised the cup he glanced at Loznevoi, who stood beside him silently rubbing his burnt fingers with the bottom of his ragged jacket. Erofei Kuzmich's face glowed with self-satisfaction in the firelight.

"Well," he said, "to our health!"

He drained the cup unhurriedly, sputtered, and set it down on the floor at his feet. Then he took a bite of the onion and put it back in his pocket.

"So a new life is beginning. What's it going to be like, eh? That's the question. If we only knew! Man has a hard time of it on this earth. Never knows what's coming. Here you, have a drink!"

One cup of the strong liquor made Loznevoi tipsy. When Erofei Kuzmich went back into the

house he sat down on the woodpile in his place and looked around drunkenly. Emboldened, he called to Marika:

"Stop what you're doing and come over here."

Marika sat down beside him.

"Why didn't I leave, you say? Well, I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything. It makes no difference now. Everything! Everything!'" He was growing tipsier by the minute. "I couldn't leave this house. I couldn't! I can't do anything with myself! Do you understand?"

"But why couldn't you?"

Loznevoi seized Marika's hands and drew them to him. "I couldn't—" He paused for breath, "I couldn't go away from you!"

Marika tore her hands loose.

"I couldn't!" shouted Loznevoi. "I can't live without you!"

Marika rose. "You're drunk."

Suddenly she felt that her face was on fire. Through her mind flashed a series of recent scenes. She recalled the day Loznevoi had arrived with Andrei; how his eyes had followed her about the house; how he had spoken to her on the road outside the village; how he had lain on the porch and for a long time had not answered her question about Andrei....

"He lied to me!" The thought seared her brain. "Lied to me, the snake!" A wave of terrible anger

and wild joy surged up in her breast. She hurled the lump of dough in her hand at the tub; it spattered out to the sides.

"You won't go?" she shouted. "You don't want to?"

"No, I don't want to," Loznevoi answered in a barely audible voice.

"Then I'll go!" Marika shouted at the top of her voice. "Oh, you louse! What a louse you are!"

The woodpile shifted under Loznevoi.

"Why?"

"You know why, you rotten louse!"

"Marika, heart of mine, forgive me, don't go away!"

Marika's answer was a slam of the shed door.

She stood for several minutes on the porch. A silent, starless autumn night spread over Olkhovka and the world around. It bore down on the earth with a leaden oppressiveness. Nowhere was there the slightest sign of life. But Marika's heart beat in her breast joyfully, noisily, with all its might.

At midnight she left for her mother's.

XX

In the morning the Germans arrived.

The villagers caught first sight of them as they came up the hill. Big, dock-tailed drab dun horses

lumbered along with lowered heads, pulling heavy army carts. During the night the weather had turned bad again. Some of the Germans sat hunched up in the carts; others walked, slipping in the mud and turning their backs to the cold, penetrating wind. Occasionally they looked up at the faint spot in the lowering skies that bore no resemblance whatever to the sun.

Everybody took to their homes. The Germans were astonished at the unusual quiet that met them when they entered the village. Suddenly the barking of a dog rang out over the street. A little reddish-brown dog jumped out from a gateway and made for the carts. A tall German in a mud-spattered greatcoat turned and sent it flying with a kick. The dog landed in a puddle but leaped out and without stopping to shake itself dashed at the horses with vicious yelps. As though a signal had been given, dogs ran out into the street from the other yards—and Olkhovka did not lack dogs. They raised a nerve-racking howl in various keys. As the Germans moved down toward the centre of the village they kicked the dogs away from the carts and the horses and lashed out at them with their whips. But nothing helped: the dogs circled about the train of carts, yelping and barking, as though they had gone mad. Holding their breath, the villagers peeped through the windows at the procession

of Germans, and thought to themselves: it's a bad sign, the dogs acting up like that. . . .

The Germans came to a halt on the village square and promptly found the building of the kolkhoz office, which stood by itself. Ageyevna, the watchwoman, soon came running out. She described how the frozen Germans immediately dragged out bottles of vodka and canned goods and proceeded to refresh themselves after their journey, keeping up a constant chatter in their outlandish tongue. The women began to fear for the fate of Curly Yasha, who was left alone in the office with the Germans.

What happened in the office after that will always remain a mystery. An hour later Curly Yasha dashed out of the building, screaming. He had nothing on but his shirt, and his face and curls were smeared with tar. (Just before the Germans came Yasha had melted a batch of tar for some purpose or other.) Reeling and sobbing loudly, Yasha disappeared down the first lane. The women found him in a patch of trampled burdock out past the vegetable gardens and took him over to Anfissa Markovna's.

Here Yasha lost his curls.

Anfissa Markovna shaved him herself. She did a bad job of it and it took her a long time. Pressing Yasha's head to her breast, she poked the brush now in his ear, now against his neck, or spent an

extra long time working up a lather on the back of his head. The women stood around sadly in a circle, their chins cupped in their hands. They spoke up only when Anfissa Markovna nicked him:

"Oh, careful there!"

"You'll cut him all up!"

Yasha shorn of his locks was unrecognizable. He sat at the table and tentatively, as though after a long and severe illness, turned his little yellow misshappen head from side to side. It resembled a small pumpkin that had had to grow between the palings of a fence. The contours of his skull stood out very clearly, as though it were covered not with skin but with a thin layer of varnish. The pitiful lines on his face were deeper. All this made him older and revealed his abnormality.

"The Germans are fools," Yasha said. "They play jokes."

The women could not stop sighing, struck by the change in Yasha. Anfissa Markovna hugged him and tried to comfort him.

"Don't you feel bad, Yasha dear, don't feel bad," she said through her tears. "Don't feel bad, darling. It will all pass."

Then, remembering that Yasha, egged on by the jokes of the villagers, had planned to marry the schoolteacher, Nina Dmitrievna, and had boasted to one and all of how much she loved him, she added, almost in earnest:

"You'll see, you'll be getting married soon. Nina Dmitrievna will return, and then you'll get married. Don't feel bad, dear."

Yasha suddenly turned pale.

"A mirror!" he demanded anxiously. "Give me a mirror!"

They gave him a mirror. Yasha took one look at himself, one quick look, then, wrinkling up his face piteously, gazed at the women for a long time. His expression as much as said: "Why did you do it? Why did you shave my hair off? Now I have no more curls and Nina Dmitrievna won't love me." Many of the women could not hold back their tears. With a groan Yasha fell forward onto the table and began to scratch at it with his fingernails.

"Oh, Lord!" Anfissa Markovna sighed.

All of a sudden Yasha fell silent. A few moments later he got up. The women saw that his big eyes, always so full of affection, now blazed with a dark, evil force. He clenched his fists and screamed furiously. "I'm going! I'm going!" and ran out.

In a little while cries and shots came from the village square. Fighting down their fear, the women dashed out of the house with Anfissa Markovna at their head.

Metallic voices resounded in the kolkhoz office. On the porch, leaning against the rail post, in a

shabby, unbuttoned sheepskin, his fur cap cocked to one side, stood Erofei Kuzmich. He kept dropping his eyes and then raising them to look around with a half-worried, half-absent glance. At his feet lay the thin, boyish figure of Curly Yasha. His right ear was pressed to the ground, as though he were listening for something, and his left hand scratched at the earth. There was foam on his open lips and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. In the mud beside him lay a small carpenter's axe.

As the villagers ran toward the porch, not yet knowing what had happened, several Germans emerged from the house. One of them, a tall, lean man with a small snakelike head, adjusted the pince-nez on his nose, bent over Yasha, picked up his left hand and held it while he took his pulse. Then he ran his fingers over Yasha's shaven, mud-spattered skull for some reason and issued a command.

The Germans picked Yasha up and carried him into the building.

Erofei Kuzmich tore himself away from the post.

"Well, women, this is a fine business!" he said with an embarrassed sigh. "I was just on the way to Anfissa Markovna's over there, and he runs into me—out of that lane. One look at him and a shiver ran down my back. He was running this way, crazy

as a loon, foaming at the mouth, and he had an axe in his hand.... Well, I thought, he'll run in there to them and start a fight, and we'll have to answer for him, an idiot, the Lord forgive me. I figured the whole village would have to suffer on account of him. After all, it could have happened like that."

"Cut it short, kinsman," Anfissa Markovna said grimly.

"Well," Erofei Kuzmich went on, "so I thought I'd stand in his way and stop him, the idiot. But he goes for me with the axe. Phew, it still makes me shiver! So that's the way it turned out! I still don't know how I got away from him. And the minute he got to the porch, there they were.... Yes, he's an idiot for sure—just went asking to be killed...." He nodded at the axe lying in the mud: "Whose is that? Who'd he get it from? They ought to take it."

Everyone kept silent, as they had while Erofei Kuzmich spoke. The axe remained in the mud.

Another German, a tall, beefy man in yellow boots, clumped out onto the porch. He was in a jacket and hatless; the wind lightly ruffled the tuft of hair that stood up over his broad forehead. Placing his hands behind his back and spreading his legs, he lifted high a face reddened by wind and wine. He stood in this pose for about a minute without moving, and there was no way of telling

what he was looking at, so lifeless were his grey eyes.

"I am commandant!" he boomed all of a sudden, still without moving. "You listen my orders! If not listen, I shoot! My order is order of German army. Understand, yes?"

No one answered. But Kweiss apparently required no answer. He walked forward onto the steps, his hobnailed boots clattering, and, poking a finger at Erofei Kuzmich, addressed the crowd:

"This your man, yes?"

"He's from here," Grandpa Silanty spoke up, after a pause.

"Good man? You know him, yes?"

"We know him. A good man. But what he'll be like now—who can tell?" Grandpa made bold to say.

"Do your talking at home!" Kweiss said angrily, shaking back his tuft of hair. "This is business! I propose we elect—" Again he poked his finger at Erofei Kuzmich. "What is your name?"

Erofei Kuzmich backed up toward the crowd. "I don't want to! I don't want anything!"

"What is your name?" Kweiss repeated sharply.

"Lopukhov."

"I propose we elect Herr Lopukhov your starosta. Who is against? Nobody against? That is all. Disperse! *Schnell*!"

The crowd slowly scattered.

Only Erofei Kuzmich remained near the porch.

"Why the devil did I ever try and stop Yasha!" he groaned. "Showed myself willing to serve the Germans, it turns out.... Now try and get out of it."

XXI

Unhurriedly commandant Kweiss set a black plastic cup of the kind that go with canteens on the edge of the table and filled it with a light-coloured drink from a tall bottle with a gaudy label.

"Drink," he ordered with a brief glance at Erofei Kuzmich. "It is schnapps."

Erofei Kuzmich pressed his hat to his chest. He felt like a straw carried along by the spring flood waters.

"Thank you...."

"You are starosta," Kweiss explained gently. "You must listen to German commandant. My order is order of German army. You must execute exactly my order."

"The devil himself made me come here," Erofei Kuzmich thought despondently. "Now would be the time to stay out of sight." He lifted the cup carefully, afraid of spilling it, drank it down and slowly wiped his moustache.

"Not bad. Only it's a bit weaker than ours."

"You are starosta," Kweiss again began to explain. "You must answer all questions of German commandant. You understand, yes?"

"Yes, everything is clear. . . ."

Kweiss busied himself for a time with a tin can. Erofei Kuzmich watched him closely. For the life of him he could not make out what the German was eating "Maybe some kind of fruit they have?" he wondered. "Or maybe just plain turnip. If it's turnip he'll want meat afterwards." Leaving the fork in the can, Kweiss leaned back in the heavy wooden armchair and fixed his eyes on the starosta.

"Where your Bolshefiks?"

Erofei Kuzmich straightened up before the table.

"We have no Bolsheviks," he said with conviction. "There weren't many anyway. Some went into the army, the others ran off. The chairman of the village Soviet left long ago, and the kolkhoz chairman was the last to get going."

"Get going?"

"Oh, leave, of course. . . ."

"Where to?"

"In the direction of Moscow."

"Oh, Moskau!" Kweiss rolled his eyes. "German army will soon be in Moskau. Oh, it is big city!" He addressed the starosta again: "He left for Moskau? You must speak exactly."

"Well, I am. Saw him go with my own eyes. The women came back, but he went on. Been living without any authorities."

The starosta's report evidently did not satisfy Kweiss. He twisted his bulk in the armchair, working his jaws. Then he began to fill his pipe. He lit up and held the match over the table, watching it slowly burn out.

"And who set fire to grain?"

"Who knows! That was at night."

"At night!" Kweiss snorted, enveloping himself in a cloud of smoke, "You must know! You are starosta! You must tell German commandant who set fire to grain. Understand, yes?"

"Yes.... Only how can I know?"

Kweiss banged the table with his fist.

"You must know! We will know!" He rose and then spoke in a different voice. "Here is my first order."

"I'm listening...."

From the commandant's office Erofei Kuzmich walked the length of the village, announcing Kweiss' most strict order: all the dogs had to be hanged on the gates at once. For failure to fulfil this order there was only one punishment: the hanging of the owners, also on the gates, side by side with their dogs. The villagers were dumbfounded by the commandant's order. Soon yelps and barks rang out all over the village.

Erofei Kuzmich returned home in a black mood. As he opened the gate he saw Blackie leap out from under the porch. The faithful watchdog looked

at his master without moving from the spot, wagged his tail twice and suddenly scurried away to the barn with his tail between his legs. Erofei Kuzmich was amazed "Can it be he senses death? A creature like that, eh?" He was moved in spite of himself. "He wants to live too!" A shadow crossed Erofei Kuzmich's face.

Loznevoi appeared in the entrance to the shed. He wore a long coat pulled in by a belt, bast shoes and an old hat. On orders from the master of the house he had been cleaning manure out of the shed since morning.

"Finished?" Erofei Kuzmich called out.

"Just a little bit more, Erofei Kuzmich."

"Oho, talking again, eh?" Erofei Kuzmich shouted. "Forgot again, you damned good-for-nothing? You just watch out! I'm risking my head for you! Hurry up and finish!"

Alevtina Vassilievna rattled the pots without saying a word, but Erofei Kuzmich refused to have dinner. Without taking off his coat or hat he sat down at the table.

"What's the matter with you?" asked his wife.

"I don't want to, that's what! Explain everything to you! Always clinging like a bur!"

"Just become starosta and lost your appetite already?"

"Oh, stop your nagging!"

Vasyatka was sitting by the window with a book.

Every once in a while he glanced up at his father.

"Drop that book!" Erofei Kuzmich said. "There's a job."

"What is it, Pa?"

"Hang Blackie."

"Blackie?" Vasyatka sprang to his feet. "What for?"

"Go ask him. . . ."

"Who, Pa?"

"That commandant, that's who."

Alevtina Vassilievna grew really frightened.

"Kuzmich, what's the matter? Do you feel all right? Have you lost your mind?"

Erofei Kuzmich nodded toward the window. "Can't you hear the racket the dogs are making all over the village? Let's get going. Got to hurry."

Vasyatka burst into tears and rushed to the door.

"I won't give you Blackie! I won't!"

"Vasyatka!" Erofei Kuzmich rose. "Maybe you want me to hang on the gate in place of Blackie? Do you?"

"Just the same I won't!" Vasyatka shouted still louder, sobbing. "I'll run away with him! So there! Let him look for us—your commandant—that damned German!"

"Vasyatka!" Erofei Kuzmich made for the door. "Want the strap? Do you know what you're saying?" He caught his son by the hair. "Do you

realize what'll happen for that, you little snotter? Do you? Do you?"

"Go away!" Vasyatka burst out. "I raised Blackie from a tiny—just a puppy—Blackie!" he screamed, throwing himself down near the threshold. "Blackie, my darling!"

Pushing Vasyatka aside with his foot, Erofei Kuzmich slammed the door so hard the whole house shook. At the appearance of his master Blackie gave a yelp, bolted away from the porch and jumped over the railing into the vegetable garden.

He had to call on Loznevoi for help. Loznevoi made a noose out of a piece of rope, went into the garden, called fondly to Blackie, and caught him. When he suddenly felt the noose around his neck Blackie gave a short bark, flung himself to the side and then, choking, reared up on his hind legs. Loznevoi yanked at the rope and brought the dog to the ground.

"Drag him over here!" Erofei Kuzmich shouted from the fence. "Don't let him go! Don't give him air! Well, pull him over, you clumsy devil!"

Loznevoi dragged the dog out of the vegetable garden. Frothing at the mouth, his eyes bulging and his tongue hanging out, Blackie flung himself from side to side; he twisted in the mud, tried to brace himself with his front legs, pressed his belly against the ground....

"Jerk him up!" Erofei Kuzmich ordered. "Get him off the ground! Don't be afraid! What are you trembling for like you got a fever? Pull him over here!"

"Help me!" Loznevoi could not restrain himself from saying.

"Oho, talking again, are you? Give him here!"

After he had tossed the end of the rope over the crosspiece of the gate, Erofei Kuzmich turned aside.

"Hang him yourself," he said, clutching at his chest. "I can't. . . ."

When Erofei Kuzmich glanced at the gate a minute later he saw Blackie hanging in the noose, his paws twitching feebly. Then he noticed commandant Kweiss, hands folded over his broad backsides, walking up the little rise opposite the yard. The Commandant must have come out to see how the village was fulfilling his first order. He was flanked on one side by a German soldier with a tommy gun and on the other by Efim Chernyavkin, now beardless and in a new jacket. The latter said something to the commandant with a gesture toward the Lopukhov house, probably indicating where the starosta lived.

"He's coming here!" Erofei Kuzmich flung back over his shoulder.

But Loznevoi lost his head and stood frozen to the spot. While he was making up his mind which

part of the yard to run to, commandant Kweiss, accompanied by his soldier, had already come up to the wicket, which Erofei Kuzmich opened; the commandant's hobnailed boots left deep imprints in the damp earth.

"Starosta knows rules!" Kweiss said gaily, pleased that the starosta he had appointed had carried out his first order to the letter and thereby set an example to the entire village. "Oh, we work good with starosta. Fery good!"

Then, as a sign that now genuine friendly relations had been established between himself and his starosta, Kweiss even went so far as to slap Erofei Kuzmich on the shoulder.

"*Gut* starosta! *Gut*!"

"*Gut, Gut,*" Erofei Kuzmich repeated in confusion. He could hear Loznevoi behind him and tried to shield him from view with his body.

But Kweiss had already caught sight of Loznevoi.

"Who is he?"

Erofei Kuzmich stepped back from the wicket. When he saw that Efim Chernyavkin had disappeared over the rise his spirits rose, and he answered in as casual a voice as he could assume:

"He? Oh, he's my nephew. Deaf and dumb."

"I do not understand. What do you mean?"

"He's deaf and dumb! Deaf and dumb!" Erofei Kuzmich explained. He tried to explain by gestures,

but this merely put the commandant more in the dark than before.

Kweiss thought that the starosta was joking in the "Russian style." "Oh, starosta is joker," he laughed, in a good humour from the wine. "*Gut* starosta."

"*Gut, gut,*" Erofei Kuzmich hastened to repeat. Now he felt more sure of himself.

With the eye of a connoisseur Kweiss examined Blackie, who was slowly turning to the west on the noose. Then he pointed to Loznevoi and asked:

"He hanged him, yes?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

It was all Loznevoi could do to keep from trembling.

"Good job!" Kweiss said. "I saw it. Quick! He can hang fery good."

Erofei Kuzmich saw that the danger had passed, and in his relief he said:

"Herr Commandant, won't you come into the house? You are welcome to all we have. That schnapps, we have some.... *Gut* schnapps!"

"Oh, schnapps!" Kweiss exclaimed, and stepped through the wicket.

As they mounted the steps Erofei Kuzmich caught sight of the little bag with the stalk of Peter's Cross hanging above the door. He heaved a sigh, hastily said a few words of a prayer to himself and crossed over the threshold into the entranceway.

XXII

By noon all the dogs had been hanged.

The people of Olkhovka had always considered that the presence of a dog made a real yard and that without one it was simply a barren, untenanted spot.

And now there were no dogs.

With the yards silent, the long autumn nights were terrifying: every minute it seemed as though someone were knocking at the gate, wandering about the yard, stealing into the barn, shuffling in the entranceway.... Everybody was oppressed by the same feeling—that by hanging their dogs they had ceased to be masters of their homes, their property, their destiny.

...The kolkhoz office the Germans took over as the commandant's office, while in the Oreshkin house next door, deserted after the family's departure, they set up their living quarters. They cut down several thin young birches in the middle of the village—the village immediately lost some of its soft, radiant glow—and made them into long rails without stripping the bark. With these they fenced off both houses. The tops of the trees were used to form an aisle leading up to the door of the commandant's office. A sentry armed with a tommy gun was stationed here at once; he stood hunched over, sheltering his face from the wind.

What went on inside the houses the Germans had taken over none of the villagers knew. Everybody was worried about Curly Yasha:

"Probably dead, poor dear. . . ."

"If he was dead they'd give us the body to bury."

"Maybe they're treating him. One of them is a doctor, isn't he?"

"Maybe they are, if there's a doctor there. . . ."

The next day commandant Kweiss was ill: the Russian home-brewed schnapps had been too much for him. He did not appear and did not even summon Erofei Kuzmich. At the door the sentries relieved one another in turn. The Germans worked silently around the carts in the yards they had taken over; they carried water from the wells and brought armfuls of firewood into the houses. Smoke poured from the chimneys all the time. Looking at the houses occupied by the Germans, the villagers swore to themselves:

"Damn those silent devils!"

"If they'd only tell us about Yasha. . . ."

When Kweiss had recovered a bit from his severe hangover, Doctor Rhöde invited him into his room. It was evening. The windows were tightly curtained with black-out paper. On the table stood small round lampions filled with reeking fat. They produced a faint, flickering light.

"My dear Kweiss," said the doctor, "I am leaving tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"This trip I have made with you," continued the doctor, adjusting the pince-nez on his nose, "despite its various hardships en route, I consider positively extraordinary. I have succeeded in obtaining here extremely interesting and very important material for my new book."

Kweiss' head was still not working properly after his hangover. "For the book?" he asked, running his lacklustre eyes over the lights.

"Yes. You know, I am sure, that I left my splendid study in Strassburg and upon a commission from Professor Hirt have been accompanying the army in order to acquire as much material as possible for my new book. In it I shall give very convincing proof of the superiority of the German race over all other races, especially over the Slav race, which nature itself has doomed partially to extinction within the nearest future, and partially to become our slaves. . . ."

"Yes, I heard about that," Kweiss answered. "It should be a wonderful book. And have you already succeeded in getting hold of important material for it here?"

"I shall show you right away, my dear Kweiss."

Silently Doctor Rhöde opened his suitcase. Glancing into it, Kweiss was struck dumb by what he

saw: the suitcase was filled to the top with human skulls and bones, still gleaming white. Doctor Rhöde carefully took out a small skull and placed it on the table between two lampions.

"I don't understand," Kweiss said uneasily.

"This is the skull of the deputy chairman of the Olkhovka kolkhoz, a Bolshevik," Rhöde said. "It will be placed in the museum of our society for the study of phenomena of heredity, in Strassburg."*

"His?" Kweiss marveled.

"He is a typical representative of the Russian nation, which is doomed to extinction," Doctor Rhöde continued. He touched the skull. "You will note that the entire structure of the skull indicates very clearly the low mental development of this representative of the Russian nation." He turned the skull a trifle. "Look at this. These bulges and those lines, so says science, my dear Kweiss, indicate that these Russian tribes, as a result of intermarriage, have degenerated into veritable idiots. They indicate that they can be used only as beasts of burden, and that the majority of them are simply dangerous for the new society we are setting up in Europe. Do you understand?"

* At instructions from Himmler a collection of skeletons and skulls representing all races and peoples was built up in Strassburg under the guidance of Hauptsturmführer Professor Hirt, director of one of the departments of the Institute of Military Research of the Administration on Questions of Heredity.—*Author's note.*

"Yes, I do," Kweiss said, leaning forward.

The commandant's head was not yet quite clear. He looked at the table, and before his eyes spread a vast expanse over which were scattered piles of twisted metal and a multitude of skulls, and everywhere fires were blazing....

XXIII

The next day Olkhovka witnessed a new occurrence, the like of which it had never known, not even in the darkest periods of its centuries of existence.

Erofei Kuzmich held firmly to one resolution: to live quietly and unobtrusively, like a bat. "Look at the way bats live," he often reflected. "When the bad weather comes they hide and go to sleep, and when summer arrives they come to life again. And even in summer they only fly about their business at night. That's the way they live! Smart creatures they are!"

From the very first Erofei Kuzmich had resented the behaviour of the Germans in the village. He had become deeply convinced that they were really cruel and merciless, and that while they were there any sort of crimes might be expected. Hence, although he had become starosta under pressure from Kweiss, he secretly resolved to shirk his duties in every possible way. No benefits were to be derived

from them, and they could easily get him into trouble. When he discovered that Kostya had gone off into the woods, where there were partisans, he realized that he would have to be especially careful. If the partisans were to learn he was serving the Germans faithfully they would take his head off for it. Accordingly, he decided never to appear at the commandant's office without a summons, and to perform all his duties, until he could get rid of the job, in such a way that all the villagers understood he personally meant them no harm whatsoever.

When he was summoned to the commandant's office that day he turned to his family and conjectured:

"Maybe they're planning to leave, eh?"

"May the devil take them the sooner!" his wife answered.

"You wait, he will!" Vasyatka, who was lying on the stove shelf, put in confidently.

"After all, what have they to do here?" Erofei Kuzmich said, flinging a coat over his shoulders. "There's nothing for them to do here. They should be fighting. Ye-es, it must be they're leaving.... Where are my gloves? If they leave it'll be better, less trouble."

On the square before the kolkhoz office stood a few ancient birches with rough, split bark at their bases; long branches drooped from their sloping

tops almost to the ground. Long ago benches had been built beneath these birches, and two big rocks worn smooth by time stood there. The elderly kolkhoz men frequently used to gather there in their free time. They would open their pouches, roll cigarettes, and, puffing away, leisurely discuss kolkhoz affairs, and the affairs of the country and the world as well. Sometimes, when the weather was sultry, kolkhoz meetings were conducted there under the birches. In spring and summer the village young folk gave up the clubhouse and held their evening gatherings there. The merriment lasted until midnight, with singing and dancing and accordions playing. It was a happy, joyous spot.

As he crossed the square Erofei Kuzmich glanced at the birches and came to an amazed halt. Germans were crowding around the trees. Axes glittered in their hands.

"It can't be they want to cut those down too?" he wondered. "May their hands wither away on them, those German dogs! What do they want? That means they're not planning to leave yet. . . ." Then Erofei Kuzmich saw that the Germans had not come out to cut down the trees. They were putting up a bar between two of them. He did not understand what the bar was for, yet his heart gave a sudden stab. "What are they planning, eh?" He stood there another moment, puzzled, then went on, glancing about apprehensively.

When he was near the commandant's office he saw Efim Chernyavkin emerge. "He's given me away!" Erofei Kuzmich gasped, and again halted, grasping at the birch paling. His heart contracted so painfully that a searing sensation spread through his whole chest. Efim Chernyavkin, his jacket open and his hands in his trousers pockets, airily strode past the sentry without glancing at him. When he came up to the starosta he said, with a twitch of his black brows:

"Just coming, Kuzmich? They're waiting for you in there."

"For me?" Erofei Kuzmich whispered, his voice breaking. "What's in there? What for?"

"You don't know? Go on in, they'll tell you!"

It took Erofei Kuzmich some time to get through the door. To let him pass the sentry stepped to the left, and so did he. Then the sentry, with a grimace of irritation, moved to the right, and he did also. This was repeated several times. The end came when the sentry uttered a growl and poked Erofei Kuzmich so hard in the back with his tommy gun that he almost measured his length in the entranceway.

Kweiss greeted him coldly.

He stood leaning his plump womanish backsides against the table, his feet apart as though he were about to make a lunge. Erofei Kuzmich had just

entered the room and removed his hat to bow when Kweiss sprang forward and, shaking back his tuft of hair, quickly pointed his finger at Erofei Kuzmich's chest.

"You are starosta!" he barked. "You must say who in your fillage set fire to grain.You must say eferything. Answer!"

The pain in Erofei Kuzmich's chest instantly vanished. "There, thank God, it's not about that good-for-nothing!" he thought. "Again they're talking about that grain."

"How should I know, Herr Commandant?" He screwed up his face piteously. "If I saw it that would be another thing. I was home when the fire started. People know I was—"

"You must know!" Kweiss barked.

"No, Herr Commandant, you can do what you want with me, but I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know, and I can't say anything without knowing. I don't want a sin on my conscience."

Kweiss turned around abruptly and pointed to the corner.

"Did he?"

Only now did Erofei Kuzmich realize what had happened that morning. Osip Mikhailovich, the kolkhoz steward, sat slumped on the floor near the stove. His dark shirt hung in tatters, revealing purple welts on his body. His face was scratched and

his moustache bloody. His eyes beneath their shaggy frowning brows were filled with inexpressible anguish and the blaze of barely restrained fury. "Efim gave him away!" Erofei Kuzmich realized, his whole body turning numb. "Oh, the black soul! Condemned a man to his death, did he?" And although Erofei Kuzmich was angry at Osip Mikhailovich for what the latter had said to him in front of everyone out in the kolkhoz yard, still, realizing death threatened the steward, he replied firmly:

"I don't know. I didn't see it, and if I didn't see it, how can I say? I haven't much longer to live—"

"He is Bolshefik?"

"And he was never a Bolshevik, Herr Commandant," Erofei Kuzmich answered still more firmly. "That I know for sure. He was all for the kolkhoz, it's true, but as for joining the Bolsheviks, no, he didn't. I won't have a sin on my conscience, no matter what. . . ."

Osip Mikhailovich raised his eyes to Erofei Kuzmich and his blood-flecked moustache quivered.

"Forgive me, Kuzmich, before I die," he said, breathing painfully. "I thought badly of you. . . ." His eyes lost their flash of fire for a time.

Kweiss did not understand what the steward had said.

"What did you say?" he shouted. "What? Answer!"

Osip Mikhailovich looked at the commandant and said intensely through his teeth:

"Stop your barking, you dog!" He waved his hand at Erofei Kuzmich. "He doesn't know anything!" Then he added quietly: "I'm a Bolshevik, been one a long time."

"Oho!" Kweiss exclaimed in triumph with a glance at his soldiers standing near the window. "He confessed. He is Bolshefik!" In his puffy face his tiny grease spots of eyes floated upward. "Oho!" he exclaimed again. He turned and started to speak to the soldiers in German.

Meanwhile Erofei Kuzmich came up to the steward. "What's the matter with you, Osip Mikhailovich? Are you in your right mind? Why did you say that about yourself? Tired of living? You were never a Bolshevik. The whole village knows that!"

"Openly I wasn't," Osip Mikhailovich said. "But actually I was, Kuzmich, that's the thing."

"You were?"

"Yes. For a very long time."

Erofei Kuzmich made a wry face. He knew this was not true. "You're done for, Osip!"

"I know."

The Germans had dragged Osip Mikhailovich to the commandant's office early that morning. All morning he had stubbornly denied setting fire

to the grain and had endured the beatings with clenched teeth. But a few moments before Erofei Kuzmich came in he had realized from Kweiss' enraged face that there was no escape: someone in Olkhovka had to pay the penalty for the burning of the grain. He knew that no one in the village, not even Efim Chernyavkin, would think of accusing Anfissa Markovna. Women did not do such things. If he continued to be stubborn the Germans would in all likelihood seize and murder totally innocent people, and perhaps many of them, at that. With the composure of a man conscious of doing his duty Osip Mikhailovich decided to take all the blame upon himself, the more so since Efim Chernyavkin had pointed him out as the guilty one. "I'll be the only one to suffer," he thought, "and that'll be the end of the matter. I'm not afraid to die, I've seen death in my time!" After coming to this decision Osip Mikhailovich experienced peace of heart and mind.

Kweiss finished giving instructions to his soldiers and came back to the steward.

"You are Bolshefik! You set fire to grain!" he shouted.

"Yes, and I set fire to the grain," said Osip Mikhailovich, throwing his head back against the wall so that he could look straight into the commandant's eyes. "I dragged over kerosene, poured

it on and set fire to it! And now, you filthy mugs, do what you like with me!"

An hour later the Germans herded people from all over the village to the square. It was a calm, overcast day. There had been a heavy rainfall at dawn, and the roofs and trees still dripped. Everything was soaked and seemed weighed down to the earth. It was so hazy that not even from the lofty Olkhovka hilltop could the familiar features of the countryside be discerned.

Anfissa Markovna was one of the last to reach the square. Like everyone else, she knew Osip Mikhailovich had been arrested, but she could not understand why. Knowing that she herself had set fire to the grain, in the simplicity of her heart she could not imagine that someone else might be accused of it. And so she decided it was because he had been a kolkhoz official. That is what she told all the women who came to see her that morning. She comforted them with assurances that the Germans could not do anything bad to an old and crippled man like Osip Mikhailovich, even though he was an official; but in her heart of hearts she feared the worst. When everybody was ordered to appear on the square she realized that Osip Mikhailovich was to be executed.

As she made her way through the silent, downcast crowd of villagers toward the birches, An-

fissa Markovna caught sight of Erofei Kuzmich. He stood with his hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Kinsman!" Anfissa Markovna said. "What's going on?"

"Osip is done for, kinswoman," Erofei Kuzmich whispered hoarsely into her ear. "Looks like Efim gave him away. Then he confessed. I was there and heard him say it."

"What did he confess? When?"

But Erofei Kuzmich did not have a chance to answer. German voices came from the commandant's office. A murmur ran through the crowd and it parted, like the water before the prow of a fast cutter. Down the passage that had been formed from the commandant's office to the birches ran a German soldier waving his arms. He was followed by Kweiss, who planted his hobnailed boots heavily, like a cart horse. He was in full uniform and moved along intently, as though going to prayers. Behind him came two soldiers leading Osip Mikhailovich by the arms. He was barefoot and in a tattered shirt. Everybody saw the purple welts, like burns, on his body. The Germans had no need to lead him by the arms. He went freely, although walking without his stick was difficult, and kept his eyes fixed on the birches; for the interlacing pattern of their branches and their scanty, faded leaves he could barely see the

overcast eastern sky. Behind him the crowd closed in again, but very slowly: the villagers kept looking down fearfully at the uneven traces of his bare feet in the damp, muddy earth.

Anfissa Markovna lost sight of Erofei Kuzmich. Again she found herself in the back of the crowd and could not make out what was going on under the birches where Osip Mikhailovich had been led. But then she saw the bulky figure of commandant Kweiss, gaudy with ribbons and buttons, mount some sort of platform. His loud barking voice resounded above the crowd. Anfissa Markovna's heart was beating so hard and her ears seemed to be so stuffed up that she could not distinguish a single word. She began to tug at the shoulders of the women standing beside her.

"What's he saying there, women? What's he saying?"

"About Osip," they answered. "For setting fire to the grain."

"The grain?" she screamed.

"He was the one, it turns out, who set fire to it. . . ."

Anfissa Markovna's lips trembled and turned white.

"Let me through!" she shouted weakly, and started to push her way forward. "Let me through! Let me through!" she kept saying, although it was

difficult for her to repeat the phrase so often. "Let me through!"

Before she could get near the birches Anfissa Markovna heard Osip Mikhailovich's voice. He stood on the spot where Kweiss had stood, leaning forward, and his pose was the same as when speaking about a debated point at a kolkhoz meeting. With every abrupt movement the tatters of his shirt fluttered.

"Yes, I set fire to the kolkhoz grain. I did it! By myself!" he shouted hurriedly while the Germans fussed with the noose. "I set fire to it so that not a single grain, as our Comrade Stalin told us, should be left for these"—he gestured at the men behind him—"these exterminators of the human race! I set fire to it, yes, I did it!"

"O-osip!" called Anfissa Markovna as loudly as her weakened voice would let her, "Mikhailovich!" and tried to push forward.

Osip Mikhailovich raised his grizzled blood-flecked moustache and cast his eyes over the crowd to find Anfissa Markovna. He spotted her in the section of the crowd that was milling about, and he flung his hand up. His ragged sleeve slid to his shoulder.

"Stop, women!" he shouted, trying to divert attention from Anfissa Markovna by addressing all the women. "Don't interfere, don't wail!"

When he saw that Anfissa Markovna had quietened down, he said slowly and sternly, as he had never spoken before, "Let me die the way I should, the way our Bolshevik comrades died for us in the days of the tsar!"

The noose was thrown around his neck from behind.

"... They think they can conquer us Russians!" he cried, pulling at the noose with both hands. "Think they can conquer us!" he shouted once more, and dropped.

Anfissa Markovna did not see and could not understand what happened next. The Germans around the birches broke into shouts, and a few seconds later Osip Mikhailovich again appeared on the platform. Pulling at the noose around his neck, he cried out, but now his voice was hoarse and his breath came in painful gasps.

"When our men come back they'll hang you better, you murderers you! They won't fumble! And our men will come back!" The crowd swayed, and moans rose up from it. Osip Mikhailovich spoke still faster now, knowing that these were his last seconds. "Before death, women, one sees the future clearly! Never will these damned creatures.... Never! Soviet power—"

Again he dropped, without having finished. The crossbar bent under his weight and the

birches trembled, showering the earth with thousands of large drops from their hanging branches!

As in a dream Anfissa Markovna heard voices around her:

"Oh, the murderers!"

"The devils!"

"They've hanged him!"

"Hanged him?" Anfissa Markovna asked in a strange voice, turning and not recognizing the women around her. She still could not believe it had happened. "Hanged him?" she repeated, looking from side to side. "Why, they've hanged him, hanged him!" she suddenly cried out with such force and anguish that everything turned black before her eyes.

It was as though only now the villagers realized what had happened. With cries and wails they scattered from the birches in all directions.

XXIV

Immediately after the execution of Osip Mikhailovich commandant Kweiss summoned Erofei Kuzmich and announced the tax he was imposing on Olkhovka. Within three days the villagers were to supply the German army with eighty tons of grain and several score head of horses, cows and other livestock.

Erofei Kuzmich knew what the villagers had and realized at once that the tax was far too heavy and absolutely impossible to collect. "What's this? Why, it's plain robbery!" He felt something inside him snap. "If this tax is collected the whole village will die off before spring! What are they doing?" Standing there before Kweiss, Erofei Kuzmich immediately decided with his customary firmness that under no condition would he go around collecting that thievish tax. He did not want to be the one to blame for such an unprecedented calamity. He knew that the people, no matter who was in power, would never forgive him such an evil deed. "Living on an anthill would be no worse," he thought. "And it would most likely cost me my head." Pulling himself together, he calmly and firmly told Kweiss he would inform the villagers about the tax but that he would not be able to collect it. After all, he said, he was old and ill; it would be hard for him to do so much walking, and there would be a lot of walking to do.

"Look out, starosta!" Kweiss threatened. "Ill?"

"Herr Commandant," Erofei Kuzmich implored, "you can see for yourself! I'm an old man. There's the tax to collect, and other things to do. And my legs aren't strong. I ought to have gone to the doctor's a long time ago. I'm sick all over. Can't you see? I'm like a wormy mushroom—

that's what I'm like! Don't know what keeps me going."

Erofei Kuzmich hunched his shoulders and drew himself together until he looked so small and frail that to cheer him up Kweiss said:

"My soldier will help. You understand, yes?"

Erofei Kuzmich waved his hat. "Look at the size of the village! You have to run all around it. How can I?"

After a moment's thought Kweiss found a way out. He proposed that the starosta appoint two assistants from among the villagers.

"They will be *polizei*," Kweiss explained.

Erofei Kuzmich agreed immediately. "That's a different matter!"

They quickly found one man to serve as a *polizei*. That was Efim Chernyavkin. But no matter how Erofei Kuzmich racked his brains he could not think of anybody else in Olkhovka for the job. Promising, however, to find a suitable person, he made his way out of the commandant's office with an unsteady, old man's gait, groaning.

On his way home he stopped in for a moment at Lukeria Boyarkina's. Calling her out into the entranceway he first asked about Anfissa Markovna.

"Don't know, do you, how she is? She's my kinswoman, after all. I'm worried about her.

And I just haven't the time now to stop in there."

"Poorly, Kuzmich," Lukeria sobbed. "We had to carry her home. She's lying there dead to the world. And I don't know if she'll come to."

"Why did she act up like that, eh? You see, it's not convenient for me to butt in. Why did she take on more than anybody else about Osip? Maybe, seeing she was a widow, there was something between them, eh?"

"I don't know, Kuzmich. I just can't imagine."

"Ye-es," Erofei Kuzmich said, twisting his hat in his hands. "I've come to see you, Lukeria, about something that's very important and secret. Anfissa Markovna can't right now, so I want you to tell all the women.... Go and tell them right away: women, hide your grain, hide it the best you can, before it's too late." He leaned toward Lukeria and explained: "They've put a terrible tax on us! They'll pick the village clean! Tomorrow they'll probably start searching the barns. It'll be just too bad for those who don't have the grain hidden."

Lukeria fell back against the doorjamb. "Why, Kuzmich!"

"See you don't give me away!" Erofei Kuzmich said with a quick glance at Lukeria. "I'm looking out for the interests of the whole kolkhoz. Maybe they'll still have time to hide the stuff, those

who haven't already. And if anyone mentions me—well, Lukeria, then I'll be up beside Osip. So be careful!"

At the gate he was met by Loznevoi, who humbly swung open the wicket and then started to explain with an energetic waving of the arms and mimicry that he had done all the chores. Erofei Kuzmich halted and, closing the wicket himself, surveyed Loznevoi more attentively than he had for some time. The latter was thin and stooped, a scraggly beard covered his chin, and he was dressed in a worn peasant's coat and dirty old bast shoes. A pitiful sight, he looked like one of those Tatar ragmen who used to poke around in dumps and backyards in the old times collecting discarded junk—only that every once in a while the steely glint Erofei Kuzmich remembered so well from their first meeting would flicker in his eyes. "What he's come to!" Erofei Kuzmich thought with a shudder of disgust. "Now there's only one thing left for him."

"What are you trying to show me? What's up? What are you waving your arms for?" As usual Erofei Kuzmich spoke in a blustering tone, pretending he could not understand Loznevoi. "Speak up! Well?" Unexpectedly he added, "It's all the same now."

Loznevoi's eyes grew round and he froze to the spot.

"Speak?" he whispered. His arms dropped to his sides. "Erofei Kuzmich!" He thrust his pointed little Tatar beard forward. "What's happened?"

"What was to have been expected," Erofei Kuzmich answered sternly. "They've given you away, that's what!"

"Me? Given me away? Who?"

"That I don't know. Somebody did, anyway. Who was it gave our steward away? And somebody gave you away too. I warned you. Remember?"

"Erofei Kuzmich!"

"I don't know how the Lord saved me, that I don't," Erofei Kuzmich continued without heeding Loznevoi. Then, as though recalling what he had recently gone through, he closed his eyes and shook his beard mournfully. "Jumped at me like a beast, he did. I thought he'd tear me limb from limb on the spot. He wanted to send for you then and there and string you up on the birches. That's how it was!"

Loznevoi swayed. His face worked and his eyes glazed over, as though he were drunk. "Erofei Kuzmich!" he kept whispering soundlessly.

"All right, stop your whining!" Erofei Kuzmich shouted. "The Lord saved me and I saved you. Stood up for you and practically snatched you out of the noose. I wonder now if you'll remember what I've done for you. Why, I thought,

should the man die, eh? No, I said, he's not that kind, he's against the Bolsheviks and their system."

Tears streamed down Loznevoi's cheeks.

"Yes, yes! That's right," he whispered, looking at Erofei Kuzmich wildly.

"And he ran away from their army, I said."

"Yes, yes, that's right—"

"Why, I said, kill a man for no good reason?"

"Erofei Kuzmich!" Loznevoi moaned, just as though he had only now realized that he was saved. He made a move to throw himself on his knees before Erofei Kuzmich, but the latter restrained him.

"Stop that, you! Let me finish, and if you're not a pig you'll thank me when the time comes. That bowing isn't what I need." Now he even took Loznevoi by his coat sleeves. "He said: if he serves I'll pardon him, if not I'll hang him!"

"As what? How?"

"Join that—what do you call it—*polizei*!" Erofei Kuzmich ordered sternly. "You'll be helping me. It's a decent job. He didn't understand me when I tried to tell him you were deaf and dumb, so don't be afraid to talk to him. I'll take you over to him myself. Whatever he says, agree on the spot. There's nothing else you can do now."

"I didn't want that," Loznevoi whispered dejectedly. "All I want is just to keep alive until the war ends."

"Maybe there's lots of things you didn't want! But fate makes you do them. No, this doesn't seem to be the time to hide from your fate. So dress up and we'll go soon."

Late that afternoon Erofei Kuzmich presented Loznevoi to Kweiss. Loznevoi returned from the commandant's office with a complete German outfit and a white band to tie around his arm. The door of the best room was ajar, and through it Erofei Kuzmich observed Loznevoi with interest. First he stood before the mirror, holding up the grey, snake coloured German jacket to his chest. Then he sank onto the trunk, where his new clothing lay, and sat there a long time, his shoulders shaking....

The next morning Erofei Kuzmich did not get out of bed.

Alevtina Vassilievna fussed around the stove a long time, waiting for him to get up. Then she asked in the cold tone she had been using to her husband of late:

"What are you lying there for? A big chief, eh?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" Erofei Kuzmich answered with a groan. "Better steam up some bran. All my bones are aching. Oh, Lord, my eyes can't see a thing. It must be from this damn weather!"

Loznevoi and Chernyavkin had to make the rounds of the houses without him to collect the tax

levied by the Germans. From that day on the two *polizei*, accompanied by Germans, roamed about the village from morning to night. They searched all the barns and storerooms and took every last bit of grain the kolkhoz people had, took their livestock, poultry and the vegetables laid aside for the winter. From morning to night the yards resounded with swearing, shouts and the wailing of women.

Cold, rainy weather moved up to envelop the world.

The heavens wept and wept.

PART THREE

I

In a dark fir wood on the other side of the Vazuza Captain Ozerov called a long halt. It was a calm, sunny day, the last day of Indian summer. Far away to the east, where the war had rolled on, there was the heavy crash of demolition bombs, but in the wood an autumnal stillness reigned. The squirrels laboured gaily: they rummaged among the needles, gnawed at cones, fixed up their tree hollows for the winter. The busy tomtits kept up an incessant twitter in the underbrush. Slowly and meditatively the birches dropped their yellow leaves in a circle, one by one, like a player laying out a

game of solitaire; they were telling their fortunes with the leaves.

As Captain Ozerov had expected, all day long men from the regiment who were making their way east drifted into that big wood. Lookouts stationed in many places along the river met them and led them to the camp. The first to show up, almost in full complement, were the companies from the left flank of the defence line. The deliberate, phlegmatic Captain Zhuravsky had fought on longer than all the rest and had managed to preserve his battalion better than the others. Then small groups from the distant right flank began to appear. They brought the news that Battalion Commander Bolotin had perished—he had thrown himself under a tank with a bunch of grenades—and that the commissar of the regiment had taken over command of Battalion One. Finally the main body of Battalion One arrived, led in strict formation by Yakhno himself. To everybody's surprise and joy, by evening more than half the riflemen of the regiment had assembled in Ozerov's forest camp.

The meeting between Ozerov and Yakhno raised everyone's spirits.

As is the case with most people after their first battle, an indefinable change had come into Yakhno's face: some added wrinkles, or perhaps it was that his eyes, which had gazed upon death, had

taken on a different shade. But, as usual, he looked young and cheerful. In the olive-green soldier's padded jacket for which he had changed his great-coat just before the battle he seemed even trimmer and lighter on his feet than before. The men eagerly sprang to their feet and saluted him as he passed them. Then they gathered in knots and talked.

"Now the commissar's here too."

"You know, fellows, somehow I feel better when he's with us."

"Maybe things'll pick up for us now."

When he met Ozerov, Yakhno quickly seized both his hands in his, squeezed them as hard as he could and shook them for a long time, a smile playing on his open, youthful face. Noticing the bandage on Ozerov's head he quickly asked:

"Lightly?"

"Just a scratch."

"I knew we would meet!" Yakhno exclaimed, still holding Ozerov's hands. Then, remembering how they had parted before the battle, when the captain for some reason had held for a long time the little autumn flower he had picked, he said, "I believed in this! Did you?"

"Yes, so did I," Ozerov answered in embarrassment, noticing that the men had crowded around them and were listening to their conversation.

"Well, I congratulate you, Captain!" Yakhno

shook Ozerov's hands again. "I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart!" Then he also noticed the men around, and, dropping Ozerov's hands at last, went on in a voice louder than was necessary for the captain alone to hear: "Anyway, the regiment fulfilled its assignment. True, we paid a heavy price for it. But the first success, even if it's a small one, always comes dear. Now we know that we can detain the Germans. And once we know that, we'll stop them!"

Yakhno and Ozerov walked through the entire camp, talking with the men on the way, and came out to a clearing all covered with the patterned, gold-tinged fronds of ferns. They went into the golden sea up to their knees and stopped.

"I'm very, very glad you've come, Comrade Commissar," Ozerov said. "Voloshin—you know?"

"I saw his grave."

Yakhno folded his hands behind his back and took a few quick paces through the sea of golden ferns and back.

"You were right!" he said suddenly, halting in front of Ozerov. "A mistake was really made in the way the defences were built. You were the first to realize that there was a mistake, and that does you credit. I am happy for you. You are the one to command the regiment, and no one else!"

"But you're the commissar. The two of us, then?"

"Good. Juridically it will be the two of us," Yakhno agreed. "But actually it will be you alone. You have earned the right to. And I shall be there to help you. You see, I am not one of those who are out for power. At a time like this one has to be especially honest in his attitude toward power." He fell silent. "I am convinced that there should be one commander in a military unit. With full powers! And he must be wise. His thinking ability must be highly developed. A battle is first of all a contest of minds, and then of arms. One must think and think!"

Ozerov smiled. His eyes shone a clear summer blue.

"But for the time being we have to put our heads together," he said. "Two heads are better than one, they say. And especially at a tough time like this."

Yakhno raised the visor of his cap, and a few damp locks of blond hair fell onto his forehead.

"Shall we discuss what to do?" he asked with a glance at Ozerov.

"Yes."

"Let's go over there."

They went farther in, leaving a broad trail behind them; a flutter passed through the fronds almost all over the clearing.

"I was crossing the Vazuza just now," Yakhno suddenly said in a totally different voice, "and

you know the kind of pebbles there are there? Look, they dazzle your eyes. I collected a whole pocketful!" He drew a handful of coloured pebbles from his pocket. "See? Simply wonderful! They're for my son. As soon as we reach our lines I'll send them home to him. He's a great one for collecting little stones."

... That night all those gathered in Ozerov's forest camp had a good rest. In the morning there was an order of the staff appointing Senior Lieutenant Golovko, the head of a scout platoon, commander of Battalion One in place of the late Captain Bolotin. The officers and men of Loznevoi's battalion were distributed among the various small units temporarily, until the regiment emerged from enemy-held territory. At noon there was a review of the regiment. The two rifle battalions and the small units lined up on a big clearing. When the order "Att-en-tion, the standard!" rang out and when the regimental battle colours were unfurled, all in gold embroidery and thick fringe, everybody felt a thrill—the thrill which always comes when on review—pass through the ranks like an electric current, and everybody realized that the regiment was saved and was again beginning to live according to the familiar rules of army life.

That day the autumn bad weather set in. The sun did not appear. Clouds shut out the sky. The fallen leaves swept noisily through the wood.

Shortly after the review ended, dark clouds gathered overhead, and then, hesitatingly, a slow autumn rain started.

Again the men became despondent. They gathered in groups under the spreading firs and talked in low, anxious voices:

"So we're all together, but what's the good of it?"

"Yes, brothers, autumn's here. It makes you blue."

"It'll start pouring, and then where'll we go?"

"The weather's enough to make you wish you were dead."

Commissar Yakhno immediately sensed that the bad weather was quickly dampening the mood into which the men had been put by the review. After talking it over with Ozerov he summoned Political Instructor Voznyakov, the regiment Party organizer. Voznyakov, a man with a prematurely spreading girth, came up with the lazy gait of a civilian, holding against his thigh a yellow leather map case stuffed to overflowing with papers.

"Registered all the Communists?" Yakhno asked him.

"To the last one." Voznyakov reached for the case.

"Get them together at once."

"A meeting?"

"Yes."

The Communists gathered in a sheltered spot under a clump of old firs a little way from the camp. While waiting for Yakhno and Ozerov they gloomily discussed the weather. Voznyakov had laid his map case on his knees and was studying some papers he had spread out on it. Every once in a while big drops fell on them from the branches.

"Damn it!" Voznyakov exclaimed. "How can I take down the minutes here?" He looked around. "Anybody shaking the branches?"

"Nobody's shaking them," answered Yurgin from behind him. "It drips right through."

Degtyarev gave a shiver. "Yes, it's rotten weather. Wonder if it's for long."

"Now it's for long," a knowing voice put in.

And under each fir it went:

"Look at that, it's even got dark!"

"Will it come down now! And this is a god-forsaken district!"

"Even a dog wouldn't be out in weather like this."

Yakhno and Ozerov appeared. They walked side by side over the wet grass, making no effort to protect themselves from the rain. A short way from the spot where the meeting was to take place they stopped, talked for a moment and then burst out laughing, the way only men who are confident of

themselves can laugh. Everybody was amazed by this laughter. They fell into puzzled silence.

"Nasty weather, isn't it?" Yakhno said gaily. He was the first to come under the firs.

The answers were slow and depressed:

"Autumn, Comrade Commissar."

"Now it's for a long time!"

"You can't get away from it: the weather's bad."

"Bad?" Yakhno said with an ironical smile. "But, comrades, I tell you this is wonderful weather! All day yesterday I dreamed of weather like this. Oh, I thought, if only the rains set in! It's high time they came. Let it rain for a week, even two. And now all my wishes have come true." He turned to Ozerov, who was shaking the water from his cap. "Isn't it marvelous, Comrade Regiment Commander, that this weather has finally set in?"

"It's very good," Ozerov answered in a serious tone.

"I'll confess," Yakhno continued, smiling, "that yesterday I was a bit depressed too, when I looked at the sky. How long is this Indian summer going to last, I asked myself. But today my heart really feels much lighter. Look at how the sky is covered over. That means it's for a long time. A week, maybe more. Yes, we're very lucky! Very lucky indeed!"

Everybody listened in amazed silence. Then a sergeant in a wet and crumpled garrison cap poked his head out from behind a nearby fir tree and asked distrustfully:

"Comrade Commissar, what do you like about all this wetness? We'll rot on the stalk in weather like this!"

"What do I like about it?" Yakhno surveyed the sergeant, and his customary smile gave way to a stern expression. "The fact that it helps us in the war, Comrade Sergeant! Right now it's helping our troops to hold back the Germans." He glanced around swiftly. "The staunchness of our troops is growing from day to day, in spite of the losses. Everywhere they are beginning to defeat and halt the enemy. Nowadays even in dry weather it's hard for the Germans to advance. How are they going to in such mud? The roads all around here are bad, and there are forests and swamps.... How far are they going to get in this mud with all their heavy equipment? Half their tanks and guns will get stuck in the swamps for good, and there will be bottlenecks on all the roads and at all the river crossings. And that will be the end of their offensive!"

The Communists no longer heeded the rain; they emerged from their shelters and gathered quietly around the fir tree by which the commissar stood.

"So you see," Yakhno continued, striving for the

tone one uses in private conversations and not at meetings, "the worse the weather the better for us. The heavier it rains the lighter our hearts should be. While the Germans are bogged down in the swamps we will get out of the area they occupy and join up with our forces. I am certain that it will not be long now! And that is why, Comrade Sergeant, I like such weather. All the men in the regiment should like it. The Communists should be the first to realize this. And the Communists must explain to all the others that the worse the weather is, the quicker we'll meet up with our forces."

Many of the Communists lowered their heads guiltily. The sergeant in the wet garrison cap slipped away behind the fir.

"It's hard for us too?" Yakhno asked, screwing up his eyes. "Dripping down our collars? Feet wet? But are we worse men than our fathers and grandfathers?"

"It's all clear, Comrade Commissar," Matvei Yurgin answered moodily but resolutely. "We'll go on without any more talk. We're used to this kind of weather."

"The mud isn't anything terrible, of course," came a voice from behind the tree. "The bad part of it is we're cut off."

"Who's that said we're cut off?" Ozerov suddenly barked. "Who's that behind the fir? Say you, come on out!"

The Communists parted to let him pass, and the sergeant in the wet and crumpled garrison cap stepped forward. He was a thickset, pasty-faced man in a worn greatcoat. Ozerov shook his finger at him.

"Forget that stupid word! Completely! Do you hear?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain!"

"Forget it!" Ozerov shouted. He turned to the others and spoke in his usual brusque, assertive tone: "Anyone who uses that stupid word will pay for it with his head. Remember that! Who invented that word? Cowards did!" Then, without realizing that he was repeating a thought he had read in *War and Peace*, he said: "That word has no meaning. You can cut off a slice of bread but you can't cut off an army. It is impossible to cut off an army, to bar its road, because there is always plenty of space all around and a new road can always be found. And then there is the night, when nothing is visible. Cut off, indeed!" Again Ozerov shook his finger at the sergeant. "Tomorrow morning we set out, and I don't want to hear that rotten word again. You Communists must see to it that not a single soldier uses it. And during the march you must set an example by your courage, endurance and cheerfulness. It won't be easy going—there's no use hiding the fact—but then, what comes easy in war?"

Political Instructor Voznyakov decided that it was time to open the meeting. He edged up to Yakhno and asked in a whisper:

"Shall we begin, Comrade Commissar? Everyone's here. Altogether there's—just a minute—"

"What meeting?" Yakhno interrupted him. "The meeting's over already."

Voznyakov dropped his hands with the papers to his sides in consternation.

"Over? Why— What about the minutes?"

"We'll get along without minutes."

Yakhno gave some other instructions, and five minutes later the Communists went back to their places in the camp.

II

In the morning the regiment set out.

Behind the first line of German troops all sorts of headquarters, service units and reserves were moving along the highways leading to Moscow. The incessant rumble of German tanks and heavy trucks, the roar of motorcycles and the clatter of wagons hung over the highways. Passing enemy units were billeted in the villages along the roads and in those off them that were accessible. Commandant's offices and garrisons were hastily set up in the district centres and other small towns. By all signs the Germans had succeeded in breaking through to the area around Moscow.

Ozerov's regiment had but a single course: to avoid the highways and the places occupied by the Germans and push through the fields, forests and swamps. This involved almost no danger; not even the noises of war penetrated there. At first, before they became accustomed to their new status and were still apprehensive, the men liked the cross-country march, but soon they all realized that the going was very difficult indeed.

From day to day the weather grew worse. The rain poured down unceasingly; it was as though in the course of the summer the vault of the sky had become all rusty and eaten with holes. The countryside turned into a sea of mud through which the men ploughed knee-deep. The forests were inundated as during floodtime; inside them it was dark, and the air was heavy and stagnant. During the first few days of the march the men were forced to abandon all the carts and even the heavy machine guns in the impassable swamps.

But even without the carts and the packs the going was unbearable. The bad roads and the weather wore the men out. They moved ahead at various times, depending upon the circumstances: at dawn, in the evening, during the night. They were in a hurry to overtake the advance German units and get out of occupied territory as soon as possible, and hence halts were infrequent. Besides, what sort of rest could they get out in the rain

under the open sky, or under some fir tree? There was little to eat. They had no food with them and had to content themselves with late mushrooms, berries and what they occasionally managed to obtain in the infrequent and half-deserted forest settlements they passed through. It was a case of punching new holes in their belts. On top of everything else, the men were poorly dressed and shod; they had neither warm hats nor mittens, and they were almost always wet to the skin. And the nights were turning cold. They would awaken from a sleep of dead exhaustion to find themselves frozen to the ground together with their pallets of fir branches or straw. Nor was it always possible to warm up; even fire was helpless in the face of the dampness and rain that covered the entire area. At the end of a week's marching many were so weak they barely kept on their feet. It was a bitter sight to look at the men who marched behind Ozerov and Yakhno. They were emaciated, feverish-eyed and shivering, in uniforms scorched at the campfires and plastered with mud. But they marched on and on, gloomy and silent.

Early in the second week the regiment emerged from the dark Rzhev forests and entered the territory of Moscow Region. Here the fields were larger, the ground firmer underfoot; there were more villages, and in the forests and groves of mixed trees it was light and pleasant. Here the

going became much easier. It also became much more dangerous. The scouts kept encountering the enemy everywhere. German units were billeted in almost all the villages. In many places the Germans had set up various storehouses, temporary garages and filling stations. By the sides of the roads lay bogged down and wrecked German tanks and overturned wagons and trucks. On the hilltops stood cemeteries with even rows of birch crosses. Some of the villages had been burned to the ground; among the fresh ashes and naked chimneys reared gallows on which swung barefoot bearded old men, and women and girls with loose hair and uncovered breasts. And as far as the eye could see big and small columns of smoke rose, fading away in the overcast sky.

Ozerov's men realized that the German offensive had been halted and that the front was not far off. Then there came the moment when the distinct boom of guns floated over from the east. As they listened, many of the men wept. From that moment on, spent though they were, Ozerov's men pushed eastward with still greater determination.

But the going became more difficult with each passing hour. The same evening that they heard the guns they met a column of Germans while crossing a highway. Here they fought their first skirmish. They set several German trucks on fire

and killed a large number of Germans. They themselves were surprised at the way they had fought and what they had achieved. They all saw that despite its losses and the difficult march their regiment had become stronger and braver and more coordinated in battle.

III

Freezing weather set in.

The earth, tightened up by an icy wind the day before, became as hard as stone. Everything on it, now frozen stiff, crackled and rustled underfoot—the flattened grass, the moss, the fallen leaves, A keen ear could determine at a distance that hundreds of people were moving through the trackless forest.

The men kept close to the edge of the forest. Where the forest thinned out they could see, to their right, patches of fields with rain-blackened haystacks, and on the rises, denuded trees. Farther away, beyond the hillsides, rose wisps of smoke. The sun was setting. In the heart of the forest it was already deep twilight, but in the clearings, where the light was better, the solitary firs were crimson in the afterglow. Occasionally, in places where the trees were thin, raw blasts pierced the men to the bone. They would turn their faces away, pull their garrison caps down over their ears, hunch up in their dirty, ragged greatcoats, press

close to one another, and make an even louder clatter with their boots against the frozen ground. The majority walked in silence, intent only on trying to keep warm. Many coughed—a hollow cough that racked their chilled chests.

Two hundred metres in front of the regiment moved a patrol headed by Commissar Yakhno which carefully examined the unfamiliar terrain. The rifle battalions advanced in close ranks; then, in one body, came the staff and the men of all the small units. In the centre of this body six men bore three stretchers: on one, sick, lay Tseluiko, adjutant to the regiment commander, and on the others two men who had been severely wounded in the skirmish on the highway. The walking wounded and the sick plodded along nearby, frequently groaning and clutching at trees or their comrades for support.

Tseluiko was carried by Andrei and Umrikhin. Andrei was at the front end. Now, in a padded jacket and boots, with a little old fur hat he had found in a deserted roadside hut perched on the back of his big head, and a hunter's knife and two grenades hanging from his belt, he looked more like a hunter than a soldier. He walked bent over, emitting hoarse sighs. He held the ends of the birch poles in a savage grip at his sides. He often tripped over roots and bumps in the ground, which puzzled Umrikhin.

"Giving up already?" the latter finally asked.

"Keep going!" Andrei answered hoarsely.

But the next instant he staggered so violently that he almost dropped his end of the stretcher. Umrikhin adjusted himself to Andrei's new stride and asked worriedly:

"What's the matter with you, Andrei? Feel all right?"

"I see bad," Andrei admitted.

"Not nightblindness, is it?"

"No, it isn't that. . . ."

"Because this is just the time for it, the evening. And it's easy to get. Hardly anything to eat."

"It's not that!" Andrei repeated irritably. "Get onto an idea and you can't let go! Come on!"

Umrikhin's amazement grew. "Look at that! Your nerves gone bad too? That's something!"

For about an hour Tseluiko had lain unconscious, but now he began to rave again. Unable to raise his feverish head, he seized the stretcher pole with his right hand and cried weakly:

"Yes, spring is here, spring!"

"You're a little mixed up, my boy," Umrikhin rejoined gently. "A spring like this can be the death of a man. My empty guts are freezing together. My God, stop throwing your arm around! You'll lose your mitten and freeze your hand stiff. What are you tossing about for? Once you're sick you ought to lie quiet. Look at how quiet

Stepan Dyatlov is lying there. Well, you just do the same!"

"And how wonderful everything is!" Tseluiko went on.

"Why, it's even better than wonderful!" Umrikhin remarked sarcastically. He wrinkled up his weather-beaten face and shook his big head, which his garrison cap barely covered. "Wandering around our own country like animals. Worn out and ragged like I don't know what. Look at the coat on me! The only reason it's holding together is because the mud pasted it and then it froze. Stop waving your hand there! What do you think this is, a meeting?"

"Ivan, shut up!" Andrei begged.

"But what's he babbling for?"

"Let him. But you shut up."

"No, I've never known—I've never known such happiness. . . ." Tseluiko muttered indistinctly but with emotion.

"There, you see!" Umrikhin hastened to continue the conversation. "He keeps insisting. He's found happiness!"

Andrei almost jerked the stretcher poles out of Umrikhin's hands. Umrikhin missed a step, then quickly got into step again and glanced at Andrei. Still holding the stretcher, the latter now stood leaning against the rough trunk of a thick birch.

"You'll drop him!" Umrikhin cried.

"Let me take a rest," Andrei begged. "I'm burning all over."

"Burning? Here, put it down."

They set the stretcher on the ground. Tseluiko continued to rave—all about spring and some girl. Umrikhin could not restrain himself. "What a chatterbox!" he exclaimed.

Andrei leaned back against the birch trunk and opened the collar of his padded jacket. Umrikhin looked into his face. Like the others, Andrei had grown thin and haggard since the beginning of the march. His cheeks and chin were covered with a long stubble. Now sweat was streaming from his temples.

"You too?" Umrikhin whispered.

A knot of men formed around them.

"Why the halt? Take your place?"

"It's Andrei there—"

"What's the matter?"

"I—nothing—" Andrei wheezed. "I—"

"He's sick," Umrikhin explained. "Burning all over."

"Somebody ought to take his place."

"No, I'll carry it," said Andrei, bending down to pick up the stretcher. "Don't need to. I'll carry it myself. I cooled off and now I feel all right."

"You'll drop him."

Andrei wheeled about. "Ivan, keep quiet! Didn't I tell you to?"

"That's it, he's ruined his nerves too," Umrikhin explained to the men. "See? Just say a word and he flies off the handle."

They started off again. Andrei felt that with each step it was becoming more and more difficult to carry the stretcher, but he walked on and on, struggling with all his waning strength to fight down the fever. At times everything turned so black before his eyes that he lost sight of the men ahead of him and blundered into trees. But he walked on, impelled by the thought that he must push to the east. . . .

Andrei was a person with a clear, direct mind, a man of simple and firm decisions. The moment he saw that he, like the others, had to go east and join up with the army, he embraced this idea fully and irrevocably. During the days of the march he had changed greatly. As he passed through the places the Germans had occupied he realized with all his heart and soul the immense calamity that had fallen upon his country. He was horrified when he saw how evil and merciless men can be. Now he felt that the peace of mind he had always known no longer existed. He felt his soul experiencing the same trouble and anxiety his native village was living through. These changes evinced themselves in his behaviour: he was now less com-

pliant and good-natured, carried himself more boldly among his comrades, spoke in an incisive, and sometimes even rough, voice, and his movements were quick and energetic and nervous. This was all evidence of the storm that was slowly gathering within him.

Dusk deepened rapidly. To the right of the winding path along which the regiment was moving there was now a dense thicket of young firs that completely hid the fields from view. On the left a big swamp overgrown with reeds and marsh grass came into sight; here and there stunted birches and frail alders rose out of the hummocks. A biting wintry wind blew from the swamp. The birches and the alders writhed in anguish; from afar they seemed to be fleeing the swamp before the deadly piercing cold of the forest wind. The frozen reeds rustled unceasingly, and the dry marsh grass drifted down among the hummocks.

Their stiff boots clattering against the frozen earth, Ozerov's men marched on, bending against the wind. They blew on their hands and rubbed their ears. Many tried skipping or jumping up and down in one spot, crunching through the ice in the puddles and tearing their clothes on the underbrush in the dark. Occasionally snatches of phrases and words rose from the plodding column:

"Winter?"

"Be here soon."

"Turns you into a lump, it's so cold!"

"Raw! Is it raw!"

Tseluiko was restless. He kept describing something wonderful in an excited voice. Umrikhin no longer talked to him. He was busy watching Andrei walk, and more and more frequently he begged him:

"Hey, careful there! You'll fall!"

To himself he muttered:

"That's luck for you. Never saw anything like it!"

Umrikhin's arms had been numb for a long time. His fingers were stiff with cold. He wanted to be relieved at the stretcher and mentioned it more than once, but either Andrei did not hear or he paid no attention. Andrei walked on and on, wheezing as he dragged his feet over the hummocky ground. There was a new, wild stubbornness in this strong man fighting down his fever.

"What a fellow!" Umrikhin marveled. "Still waters sure run deep! Even scares you, he does!"

Andrei walked on, drenched with sweat. He was putting forth all his strength. His whole attention was concentrated on not weakening, on not stumbling in the dark and dropping the sick man. Hence only rarely was he able to notice how his comrades were trying to protect themselves from the fierce wind. But during those few

seconds when he did notice his comrades he felt the same roar and whine of a wintry wind in his soul....

He did not remember how long he walked, bearing Tseluiko, or what happened on the way. He came to himself at the sound of a roaring in the sky. He was lying with his head buried in hay. Probably a haystack, he thought, and at first he could not for the life of him make out where the sound was coming from, although it was familiar. Could it be a storm in the forest? He sprang to his feet and quickly asked, although he did not yet see anyone around him:

"What's that roaring?"

"Planes," answered someone close by.

"Bombing?"

"Flying low," the same voice answered. "To Moscow again."

Andrei lay down again. A few seconds later he realized it was Matvei Yurgin he had been talking to. Then, burying his head in the hay, he said through his teeth:

"The swine!" He was silent for a while. Then "Is it far to Moscow?" he asked softly.

"Not now," Yurgin replied. "Feel bad?"

"Ache all over."

"And my arm is festering," Yurgin complained, rustling in the hay. During the skirmish with the Germans on the highway he had been wounded in

the fleshy part of the left forearm. "Roll me a cigarette, will you? Got the makings?"

The roar in the sky grew fainter in the distance and died away. Suddenly, as though a stopper had been removed from his ears, Andrei now heard the noise of the wind, the creaking of the trees in the dark, and, not far from the haystack, dry twigs crackling in a fire and men talking. Andrei sat up and asked, as if only now had he recognized Yurgin:

"Is that you, Comrade Sergeant?"

"It's easy to see you're in a bad way," was Yurgin's reply to that. "Well, get a grip on yourself, brother, and hold on as tight as you can. There's not much left to go now. We'll cross the front soon and join up. Then we'll take a rest, have a bath. . . ."

"I'll get there," Andrei said firmly. "You say you want a smoke? Just a minute."

As he rolled a cigarette for Yurgin Andrei looked around. Off to the side, under some firs, bonfires were being built up. The soldiers stood bunched around the fires, rubbing their numbed fingers over the flames. Those in back stretched out their hands above the heads of their comrades to hold them over the crackling heaps of brushwood. Andrei understood that he had not been lying in the haystack unconscious long; the regiment had stopped for a halt just a short while ago.

"Where's Tseluiko?" he asked, handing Yurgin the cigarette.

"Everybody's on the other side of the stack."

Bending over the lighter, Andrei heard Umrikhin grumbling behind the haystack. "He's fussing around the sick and wounded. Dammit!" Andrei said to himself, surprised, and bitter. "What knocked me out like that?" For some reason the smell of tobacco smoke was unpleasant. After he had managed to get the cigarette going and had handed it over to Yurgin, Andrei fell back onto the hay again. But on drawing in the heavy, mouldy odour of the hay he jumped up. He dug about in the stack and pulled out a handful of dry stalks.

"That's it! What luck!" he exclaimed joyfully.

"What've you found?" Yurgin asked.

"Ragwort. It's a weed. Against wounds. Now Comrade Sergeant, I'll fix your arm up fine, just wait and see. Throbs, does it?"

"Yes. And there's pus coming out."

"I'll fix it!" Andrei repeated confidently and excitedly.

He began to dig in the hay for more stalks of ragwort. For the first time since the march had begun Yurgin fell into a despondent mood.

"I don't have any luck, Andrei," he sighed. "My mother told me I was born in a caul, so I'm supposed to be lucky, and now this—I have no luck at all! What am I going to do now with

only one arm? How'll I fight? It's a punishment, that's what it is! I don't care whether it's weeds or any other kind of muck. I'll stand anything; just get it to working again, for God's sake! One arm won't do me any good now. Even two aren't enough! If I only had ten—there'd be something for them all to do now! Oh, wouldn't I just fix the Germans then!"

Andrei collected a bunch of ragwort and suggested:

"Let's go over to the fire. Don't worry, I'll cure you."

Off to the west, from where the regiment had come, there was the crash of a big explosion, followed by a second and a third. The men sprang to their feet and stood motionless.

"Senseless!" Andrei said sharply.

"Why senseless?" asked Yurgin. "We have to strike whenever there's a chance. War is war! Now we've blown up a dump, and you know how many shells there are there? How many of our men could have been killed by those shells?"

"That's all true," Andrei replied. "Only the front is close, and that means there're more Germans. Suppose they start chasing us? What then? How'll we manage with the wounded and the sick? So it turns out that even if we're all itching to fight there's only one thing to do—move ahead quietly,

like hunters. If they get on our trail what good will it do us?"

For more than an hour the men sat about the campfires in close circles, listening anxiously to the noises of the forest. Finally from afar came the challenges of the sentries, then voices and footsteps on the frozen ground. Captain Ozerov, followed by a small group of soldiers, quickly advanced to one of the campfires. He wore his usual padded jacket and a peasant fur hat with earlaps. He lashed at the fire with his whip. "Put it out!" he ordered.

Battalion Commander Golovko ran up to him. "We're off!"

"Looks like you're right," Yurgin remarked to Andrei.

Orders rang out. The regiment quickly prepared to move on. The soldiers filled their cans with water from the near-by swamp and hastily extinguished the fires.

IV

Ozerov's regiment made a long march that night. It moved across open fields and along country roads where the wind whirled in fitful gusts, poking into all the burrows in the ground and whistling through the uninviting groves and over the frozen, flattened grass. The regiment skirted all the villages on the way.

At dawn they entered a wood. About a kilometre farther they came to a clearing in which a small village stood hazily outlined. A charred odour floated over from the village.

Ozerov brought the group to a stop and sent a scout detail ahead. Alone with Yakhno, he said in a whisper:

"What shall we do now, Veniamin Petrovich?"

"The men need a rest," Yakhno answered. "They can hardly stand on their feet."

"I agree. What about the wounded and the sick?"

"Taking them farther is both difficult and dangerous. We must try to arrange them in this village."

"All right," Ozerov said. "It's a great pity, but there's no other way out. We're going to have to fight our way through."

The scouts returned. They reported that the Germans had burned half the village down and that only a handful of people were left in it. Ozerov and Yakhno decided to leave in the village only the wounded, the sick and those in a weakened condition. To be on the safe side, all the others would rest up in the woods to the right and left of the village.

Day broke slowly. Streaks and faint glimmers of light flashed across the ashen-grey eastern

sky beyond the forest. A wintry wind shook the bare trees and brought an occasional flurry of snow.

One group of the injured and sick was put up in a cottage at the edge of the village. By the flickering light of a small lamp Andrei and Umrikhin, acting as medical orderlies, spread rusty straw, which had soaked up the bitter autumn chill, over all the free floorspace except the scullery. The heavily-wounded Stepan Dyatlov and the sick Tseluiko were placed in the front corner. The men who were lightly wounded and the sick who could get along without nursing settled down nearer the door.

Stepan Dyatlov, his face yellow and drawn, lay breathing faintly and irregularly. He had been wounded in the stomach. He did not speak and his eyes, sunk in dark hollows, were closed. Tseluiko tossed in fever and continued to rave, though less often than before. He kept reaching out his right hand for something firm in this world to hold on to. The others groaned and shivered—they had become chilled during the night—and one of them kept grinding his teeth. The big room instantly grew crowded and the air close with the smells of stale gunpowder smoke, men's sweat, dirty clothing and rags soaked with blood and pus.

Matvei Yurgin also found his way into this cottage.

When the sick and wounded were settled and had quietened down, he called Andrei over. "Do something," he begged, his face twisting in pain. "I can't stand it."

His left arm below the elbow was wrapped in a filthy cloth which was stuck tight to the wound. Andrei started to remove the cloth, but it lifted off with the scab, revealing yellow matter underneath.

"It'll hurt," Andrei said.

"Pull it off!" Yurgin ordered.

"How? It's all stuck together!"

"Makes no difference: pull it off!"

Andrei tried again to remove the cloth. A stream of thick pus and ichor trickled down the sergeant's arm.

"Oh, it must hurt!" exclaimed Andrei. "I can't!"

"Is it hurting you?" Yurgin cried, baring his teeth. "Rip it off, you damned doctor! Don't pull it but rip it clean off! I can stand it. You just fix it up for me.... Now don't pull but rip!"

"You ought to soak it," said the mistress of the house, who was standing near the stove.

"Got water?" Andrei asked.

"Already warm. I'll bring it out."

They soaked off the cloth around Yurgin's arm in a basin and then Andrei, afraid to look at the bleeding wound, sprinkled it thickly with a powder made of the ragwort leaves.

"Now it'll heal!" he said confidently in a relieved voice.

Yurgin crawled to his place.

The sound of snoring came from the corners of the room. Andrei sat down beside Umrikhin, who was dozing seated on the floor, his right temple resting against the wall.

"Thank God it's quieted down a little," Andrei remarked.

"Now their troubles are over for a while. They'll have a rest."

"Should we talk to the owner ourselves or will the captain?"

"No hurry. How do you feel yourself?"

"The aching's stopped, but my head rings."

"How are your eyes?"

"Can't see well."

"Lay down and take a nap."

"I'll manage...."

The owner of the house proved to be a reserved, morose woman. She was tall and scraggly and had hair the colour of ashes. She kept walking back and forth in the scullery, kicking aside the hem of her long flowered cotton skirt. Her daughter, unattractive and also morose, sat beside a tub peeling potatoes. They went about their affairs silently, paying almost no attention to the newcomers. The faint light of early morning began to break through the windows, which were boarded over

halfway up and stuffed with rags and tow. Every once in a while a gust of wind dashed snowflakes against the panes.

Andrei decided to strike up a conversation with the mistress of the house.

"Tell me," he said, "what do they call your village? We've landed here but we don't know where we are."

"Sukhaya Polyana, that's the name," the woman answered after a pause. She was poking the wood in the stove.

"Far from here to Moscow?"

"Not so very."

"Were the Germans here?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" the woman answered reluctantly. "They ruined the whole village. You can see it at once. . . ."

"Burned it down?"

"The Lord saved something."

She folded her hands on the end of the ovenfork and stared silently into the fire for a minute. And it was as though something she saw in the dancing of the flames forced her to say, without waiting for the question:

"And they killed a lot of people."

The daughter stole a glance at her mother. "Mama, don't," she said softly and pleadingly.

"I'm not going to cry," she answered angrily.

"I haven't got a single tear left. Everything's dried up inside."

She turned to face Andrei and Umrikhin.

"My husband, Pyotr Matveich, was also killed," she said simply and sternly. "He said something to them, and they tied him to a black tank of theirs and—set it going fast over the hummocks."

Without waiting for questions she told the story of the German reprisals against the village. She told the story laconically, avoiding all detail.

"We had a silo dug outside the village. So they drove the old men and women and the little children there—and then! Filled it to the top! And those who tried to run away—shot them down with machine guns and crushed them with tanks so you couldn't recognize them."

A minute before, as he had finished his cigarette, Andrei had thought of lying down and taking a nap to help him fight down his illness. But now all thoughts of sleep vanished completely. How many such stories had he heard during the days of the march! "How are things now in Olkhovka?" He gave a shudder as he thought of his village and home. "The same thing?"

"It's the end of our Sukhaya Polyana," the woman concluded her story. "Those who remained alive ran away wherever they could. But we came back. We'll live here until we die. It's all the same."

"Ugh, it's enough to make you sick!" Umrikhin exclaimed with a shiver.

"But why?" Andrei asked. "Why all that slaughter, eh?"

"Because of people like you," the woman replied. Pulling out the ovenfork, she explained. "They came to us at night, men like you, our Red Army men, and we hid them in the village. In this house, though, there weren't any. The neighbours had some. But just the same they tied my Pyotr Matveich to the tank and dragged him over the hummocks!" Her voice shook. "And anybody else they could lay hands on! And then they started fires!"

"Mama!" the daughter whispered again.

"Leave me alone, I'm not going to!" she said sharply. "Now you won't get one out of me, not a tear. Cried myself out. Peel your potatoes! Everything's turned to stone, black stone, inside me."

The woman began to stir the wood in the stove with the ovenfork. Umrikhin and Andrei remained silent for a long time, now and then glancing up at her. It grew lighter in the hut. All the wounded and sick were asleep. Even Tseluiko had fallen silent and ceased clutching at the straw. As he pulled out his pouch again Andrei whispered in a distressed voice:

"That's bad! What are we going to do?"

"We ought to go to the captain," Umrikhin replied. "You go and tell him the whole story."

"Yes, nothing'll come out of this now," Umrikhin whispered, more to himself than to Andrei. "Not after such a thing. Have to look for another place."

He rose and went off to find Captain Ozerov. Andrei rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it from the little kerosene lamp, threw a glance around the room and asked, intending his words for the woman's ears:

"Blow out the light?"

But suddenly Stepan Dyatlov spoke up from the front corner.

"Don't," he said feebly. "Wait. . . ."

Andrei brightened. "Not asleep? Feel better?"

"Yes," Dyatlov answered. "I want to look at the light. Look at it, the way it flickers! I've been watching for a long time."

He lay on the stretcher between the two birch poles, covered to his chin with a padded jacket and a greatcoat. He made not the slightest sign of wanting to move, and it seemed strange to hear a voice come from such a yellow and emaciated face. An ominous decaying odour rose from his body.

Andrei knelt beside him. "Let me have a look at the wound, eh?" he said softly.

"What for?"

"I've got some weeds I found in a haystack yesterday. Let's put some on, huh? I sprinkled some

on Yurgin's arm, the sergeant, and now he's better and sleeping easy."

"All right, look," Dyatlov consented. Hope that he might still be saved must have been flickering in his heart, flickering like that little lamp.

Andrei carefully removed the coat and padded jacket from Dyatlov. The stench of decay collected under the covering struck him in the nostrils. The bottom of Dyatlov's tunic was crumpled up, and the lower part of his stomach lay bare. Both the bottom of the tunic and the wrinkled skin of the stomach were covered with dried black blood. Andrei could not even make out where the wound was. He realized that he could not help Dyatlov.

"You ought to be taken to the hospital, Stepan," he said sorrowfully.

"Cover it up," Dyatlov said sternly.

Andrei did not hear the woman come up behind him. She glanced down at Dyatlov and his stomach. She touched Andrei on the shoulder.

"Cover him up, don't touch it," she said, and moved away.

"I wanted to put on herbs—"

"Don't touch it, what can you—"

"Why did I have to get killed?" Stepan Dyatlov asked in a calm, quiet voice.

After covering Dyatlov with the padded jacket and the coat Andrei rose and quickly went out of

the house. In just his tunic, his head bare, he stood on the steps in the bitter wind for a long time, gazing into the distance with unseeing eyes. . . .

Umrikhin returned, followed by Captain Ozerov. The captain's padded jacket and fur hat with earlaps were powdered with snow. He asked how the wounded and the sick were and then sat down at the table heavily and wearily. A bedraggled striped cat came up to him. The woman of the house watched him pick up the cat and stroke it with veined hands that were red from the cold. Turning to the stove he asked in a tone that sounded as though he were continuing a conversation already begun:

"Well, what do you say? What do you think?" He nodded at the wounded and the sick. "Eh?" He began to stroke the cat again.

"What is there to think about?"

"Isn't there?"

"There's nothing to think about," the woman continued sternly. "Leave them with us, that's all! How can you drag them along with you? That's not easy, is it? God willing, we'll take care of them and cure them. What kind of a life will we have if you don't live?"

Andrei and Umrikhin were amazed by the woman's decision; they had not expected it. But Captain Ozerov took it as a matter of course. He expressed his gratitude briefly.

"Thank you, my good woman. We won't forget it."

"How many are you leaving?"

"First of all, that one," Ozerov turned to the front corner. "He's badly wounded. He, my dear woman, will have to be—"

Dyatlov suddenly stirred.

"Me?" he said hoarsely. "Leave me?"

They all ran over to him.

"No-o!" Dyatlov thrashed about under his coat and jacket. "No-o!"

He looked up at the people around him in horror, and his eyeballs rolled up so that the whites showed. Then, as if wanting to get up from the stretcher, he arched his chest high.

"He's passing away," the woman whispered.

As though sensing that death, which always stalked them, had entered the house, all the wounded and sick began to awaken and rise from their places. . . .

V

In a smoke-blackened little bathhouse at the western end of the village two sentries were stationed. Hungry, frozen and weary, they found it hard to make the time pass in their shelter. Other men were posted on the forest road along which the regiment had entered Sukhaya Polyana, and the

two sentries, depending upon them, looked out of the bathhouse at rare intervals. But it happened that just when Dyatlov was dying, one of the two, a man with a face blue from the cold and overgrown with a heavy stubble, with boils on his neck, took a last puff at his cigarette and glanced out of the tiny window at the road leading from the forest. With the swiftness of an eagle he dug his fingers into his comrade's shoulder.

"Look! Who's that?"

"What's the panic, there's sentries there—"

Men in greatcoats were running quickly from the forest toward the village in a skirmish line. Tommy guns gleamed in their hands.

"Holy mother, Germans!"

"Start shooting, you this and that!"

The instant he heard the firing Captain Ozerov guessed that Germans were attacking the village. He jumped up from Dyatlov's side and called to the men behind:

"Into action!"

All who could seized rifles.

"Can you hide them?" Ozerov shouted to the woman.

The woman only waved her hand and hurried to open the cellar trap door, calling to her daughter:

"Motrya, over here! Straw!"

"Follow me!" Ozerov ordered, dashing out of the house.

Andrei ran out onto the steps and in a few bounds reached the ruins of a little stone storehouse. The firing was so heavy that at first he could hardly make out who was shooting and from where. Bullets were whistling through the air, but he raised his head above the grey stone slabs and saw that all the men in the house who could fight had run out into the front garden, to the shed and into the vegetable patch. Ahead of him lay scattered fence rails and charred rectangles over which rose the naked hulks of brick stoves. Farther on, in the yards of the last two houses of the village, men were dashing about, firing rifles and shouting. Behind him, throughout the village, shouts and cries rose above the noise of the firing.

Andrei loaded his rifle and then raised himself over the stones again to see where to fire. In the last yard two tall men in greatcoats knocked down a soldier in a padded jacket, ran a few metres in Andrei's direction and dropped to the ground near a clump of low, flattened acacia bushes growing along the fence. An instant later other men in greatcoats appeared in the yard and also ran toward the fence.

"Germans!" shouted a voice borne on the wind.

Somewhere behind Andrei, on the other side of the street, a light machine gun began to chatter in short vicious bursts. One of the men in greatcoats who were running across the yard of the last house

toward the fence stumbled and then reared up to his full great height—in his raised hand a tommy gun was outlined against the sky. The instant the man fell over on his back Andrei realized that the shout from the side had been addressed to him, and with good reason: the Germans were running straight toward him.

Andrei's eyes suddenly glittered an intense black. In that second, for the first time in his life, he became speechless with fury; his bloodless trembling lips twitched in a horrible grimace.

"Damn bastards!"

One of the group of Germans forced to the ground in the last yard by the fire from Ozerov's men ran forward to the acacia bushes by the fence. Andrei took rapid aim and fired. Clutching at his chest as though snatching at the bullet, the German staggered three more steps and crumpled to the ground.

Just then a German jumped up out of the acacia bushes with the intention of taking the fence in a single bound, but Andrei managed to fire in time. The bullet tore the German from the fence post and sent him crashing into the bushes.

"Damn bastards!" Andrei again cried hoarsely.

With each passing second a new and overpowering hatred grew within him. His entire being was on fire. "Think you've got us, do you?" he said to himself. "Well, you damn bastards, where are

you?" He sent bullet after bullet into the acacias. He acted with feverish but keen and calculating swiftness. The ejected cartridges flew out to the side and hit the stones with a ping.

As he hastily pulled fresh clips out of his cartridge pouch and laid them on the stones Andrei first became aware that fighting was going on not only on the outskirts of the village but beyond it as well, all over the western part of the clearing. And for the first time the din of battle swept over him without causing a tightening of the heart—in that din he heard something challenging, encouraging, even refreshing. Andrei felt bold and confident. Having loaded his rifle, he rose to dash forward without considering why. Cries and shots rang out to the right, near the little shed. Several Germans who had filtered through unobserved from the right flank jumped out into the yard from behind the shed. Not noticing Andrei among the ruins of the storehouse, they opened up tommy-gun fire at the door of the house.

Andrei ripped a grenade from his belt and sent it whistling through the air at the Germans. Before he could see what the explosion had done he hurled a second grenade into the smoke hovering over the yard. Only after he heard the cries of dying men near the shed did he remember that he should have dropped to the ground after throwing the grenades. But this was just a passing thought. He immedi-

ately leaped up onto the ruins of the storehouse and, carried away by a wave of fury, dashed forward.

In several bounds he reached the next yard, where the low acacia bushes grew by the fence. He could give himself no clear account of why he had picked that yard to run to, but on glancing back he noticed with satisfaction that other men of the regiment were following him, and he shouted at the top of his lungs:

"This way! Follow me!"

He jumped onto the charred remains of the house, turned, waved his hand and shouted again, cupping his hands to make himself heard in the wind:

"This way! Come on!"

Amidst the ashes, the heaps of smashed brick, the twisted sheets of tin and the blackened boards rose the impressive brick hulk of a Russian stove with a tall, sooty chimney; it stood like a symbol of the immortality of the ravaged peasant house and its age-old traditions. His feet making a crunching sound on the rubble, Andrei ran over to the stove and pressed his shoulder to its cold, naked side. Catching sight of a German in the far vegetable patch, he jerked back his rifle bolt. The magazine was empty. He grabbed at his pouch, but there were no cartridges there either. He had taken out all his clips in order not to waste extra seconds

in loading and had left them in the ruins of the storehouse. "Damn!" he swore, feeling his pockets.

A tall German in a helmet sprang out from the other side of the stove. The long skirts of his greatcoat were tucked up under his belt to be out of the way when he ran. He pressed the trigger of the tommy gun he held at his stomach, and a stream of bullets flew past Andrei. Andrei instantly realized that the German had not seen him and was firing at random. That same instant he swung his rifle back and hit the German with the butt.

The German grunted and slumped down beside the stove.

Andrei had only a hazy recollection of what happened next. Considering for some reason or other that the rifle had done all it could, he threw it aside and flung himself at the German, who was jerking and clawing at the bricks in an effort to turn over on his stomach. Andrei grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him flat on his back. Blood flowed from the German's nose. He bared his big yellow teeth to cry out. Andrei did not know what to do with the German. Before he even had time to think about it he felt his hand automatically seize the knife he had begun to wear at his belt during the march. When he saw the knife in his hand he knew what he had to do.

"Take that, you dog!" he shouted, falling on the German.

Feeling the German still struggling under him he brought the knife down a second time, then a third, a fourth, a fifth.... He lost count of the number of times he stabbed him. He came to himself when he felt somebody pulling him away from the German from behind. He brought his knife down a last time, plunging it into the ashes and rubble.

"Stop!" shouted Ozerov, squatting beside him. "Wait!"

Andrei did not recognize Captain Ozerov immediately. He leaned back exhausted against the stove, his chest heaving, and stared at him for a while without unlocking his clenched teeth. Men ran across the yard, shouting. Beyond the village firing was still going on. Noticing that his right hand was all covered with blood and ashes Andrei shuddered and started to rub it against his trousers.

"There!" he said indefinitely. "Huh!"

Ozerov looked down at the German and gave a start of surprise: he resembled Kurt Krause, the flyer who had been shot down near Olkhovka. Ozerov recalled the grove in which he had questioned the prisoner, the dark linden, the messtin with the unfinished noodles, and Andrei standing at attention with hands trembling at his sides.

"Yes, that's the way!" he said forcefully as he stood up. "You should have right from the beginning! All of you!"

"Yes, that would have been good," Andrei agreed, not understanding what Ozerov meant.

The firing beyond the village subsided.

VI

Practically the whole of Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann's company was wiped out at Sukhaya Polyana. After removing the advance post of the Russians on the forest road and breaking into the village, Rudolf Mitmann was confident that, taken by surprise, the small "Soviet band" would be annihilated in a few minutes. He did not know that in Sukhaya Polyana itself there was only a small group of Russians and that all the others were under cover in the forest on both sides of the village. This he realized when hundreds of Russian soldiers launched a grenade and bayonet attack from the front and the rear. But by then it was too late to do anything to save the company from utter rout. The two waves of Russians came down on it like the two clamps of a steel trap.

In that battle Ozerov's men gave full vent to their thirst for vengeance. By some miracle five of Rudolf Mitmann's company survived. They were captured and taken to the house in which the regiment headquarters was located.

A short while later twelve German heavy covered wagons captured on the forest road were driven

up to the same house. In the first wagon, urging on the dock-tailed sorrel horses with the reins, sat Semyon Degtyarev, dirty from head to foot but in a gay mood and flushed as though with wine. He jumped lightly to the ground in front of the house and, gathering up the reins, called out:

"Come and get my contribution, boys!"

Umrikhin strode down the steps. "Ah, Semyon! You alive?"

"What's the matter, you dead?" Degtyarev said bitingly. "Take him."

"Take who? Where?"

"Gone blind? There in the wagon. Drag him out."

In the wagon, trussed up with rope, lay a German officer in a helmet and a dark raincoat.

"Oh!" Umrikhin was surprised. "Their company commander?"

"Exactly, comrade general. Drag him out."

Umrikhin did not understand why the prisoner had to be carried and not led, but he scooped him up off the wagon with one hand, pressed him to his side and dragged him into the house.

"That's how we treat them! Carry them in our arms!"

"An officer! With a cross!" Degtyarev bragged to the men who had run up, as he unbridled the horses, treating them with as much care as if they

were his own. "But he's so scared he can't even walk on his own two feet. An officer but his nerves are weak. Can't stand on his feet."

Captain Ozerov asked Commissar Yakhno to take care of the preparations for leaving Sukhaya Polyana and then went off to interrogate the captured commander of the German company.

... Five days earlier the infantry regiment in which Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann served had been moved back from the forward lines, where it was waging offensive action with no success, to the rear for a rest and to take on replacements. But even there Rudolf Mitmann had not succeeded in getting the rest he so needed: of late he had been suffering from a physical and nervous breakdown. The night before, a big ammunition depot located near the place where the regiment was stationed had been blown up. A few minutes after the crash of the explosions had reverberated through the autumn night, old Colonel von Grott, the regiment commander, summoned Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann. The colonel ordered him to sound the alarm at once, rouse the company and set out in search of the small "band" which had dealt such tremendous damage to the German army.

"*Vernichten*!"* von Grott had ordered briefly.

Dogs found the trail and Mitmann's company

* Annihilate!

set out in pursuit. The night was dark and the ground frozen, and the Germans had no way of telling that they were following not a small group but a whole column. Although Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann felt ill he was confident that he would successfully carry through this unexpected and, as he thought, trifling expedition.

And then—sudden and utter rout. And where? Not at the forward lines but on territory so completely occupied by the German army that it would seem the Russian wind should be afraid to stir a hair on his, Mitmann's, head.... All around were thousands of German troops, and he, Rudolf Mitmann, was a prisoner of the Russians. Was it a dream?

When Rudolf Mitmann came to himself neither his men nor the big Russian officer who had in fluent German tried to get him to talk were in the house. At the threshold stood a lone, silent, peaceful-looking guard. Breathing heavily, Mitmann rose from the floor and looked out of the window. A young birch tree standing in the front garden as though on sentry duty waved her naked branches at him. Beyond the village a rifle volley rang out. That was the volley Ozerov's men were firing in farewell over the graves of their comrades who had fallen in the fighting at Sukhaya Polyana. Mitmann however, decided that the Russians were executing his soldiers who had been taken prisoner

and that he himself had only a little longer to live. He went into a fit of hysteria.

When Captain Ozerov returned from the funeral it took him a long time to get the prisoner to answer calmly and intelligibly. Now Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann slumped on the bench, his whole body jerking, now he jumped up in front of Ozerov's table and shouted incoherently, rolling his bloodshot eyes to the ceiling and tearing the buttons off his jacket. His lips trembled all the time and tears flowed down his dirty face with its heavy chin.

"Sit down and calm yourself, I want to have a talk with you," Ozerov said to the prisoner in German, choosing a moment when the latter could hear him. "It's a very bad thing, Herr Officer, to have such nerves in a war. Calm yourself. Drink some water if you wish."

"I fought in Belgium!" Mitmann shouted. "I was in Greece, yes!"

"But this is Russia," Ozerov said. "Correct?"

"O-o, Russia!" Mitmann fell onto the bench with a groan, his body jerking; he thumped his disheveled head against the window sill. "Damn it! This country.... What a country! What a people!"

"Our people are like that," Ozerov confirmed. "Didn't you know? You didn't think they were like that?"

"I knew nothing! Nothing!" Mitmann shouted, turning wild, bloodshot eyes on Ozerov. "Colonel von Grott said last night that it was a band. He fooled me!" He jumped up again and began to pace in front of the table. "Damn everything! Everything! Everything! This campaign and the army too! What do I need it all for? I'm a nobody!" He started to rip off his shoulder straps. "There! Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann is no more!"

Ozerov rapped on the table with a clip from his pistol.

"Don't rip them off! You're an officer, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am an officer of the German army."

"Sit down! And drink some water!" Ozerov ordered sharply. "You're a poor officer. How did you intend to fight if you have no respect for your shoulder straps? Drink!"

Gasping, Mitmann drank a glass of water. Then, in a quiet and surprised voice, he asked:

"You won't shoot me?"

"No," Ozerov answered firmly.

"Yes? Is that true?"

"That is the word of a Soviet officer."

"O-o!" Mitmann moaned. He slipped off the bench onto his knees and began to sob loudly with relief, clutching at the edge of the table. "I believe you! I believe you! Your word—"

"Stand up!"

When Rudolf Mitmann had fully regained his composure Captain Ozerov stated brusquely:

"Yes, I promise you your life. But on one condition: you must answer all my questions honestly and accurately."

"I will," Mitmann hastened to reply. "I'll tell everything!"

The interrogation began. Captain Ozerov spread out on the table a map which he had found in Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann's dispatch case. In the centre of the map were various markings in coloured pencil; they looked like bird tracks.

"Do you know where your forward units are?" Ozerov asked. "Are they stationary? Are they far from here?"

"Yes, they're stationary, and I know where they are," Mitmann replied. "Five days ago our regiment was shifted back from the forward lines. But the other regiments of our division are still there. It's not far from here."

"Show me."

Rudolf Mitmann bent over the section of the map with the markings. He pointed out the sector from which his regiment had moved back for a rest and the area the division still held. Then, comprehending why Ozerov wanted all this information, asked thoughtfully:

"You wish to get through in the direction of Moscow?"

"Yes."

"You can't. I'm telling the truth. I can tell you that crossing the front now is not difficult, but getting to it is impossible. Here, as you can see, there are no woods almost all the way to the line of the front. Open country. Nowhere to hide. And this whole district—I'm telling the truth—is completely occupied by our troops. They're in every village, on every road. You can't make it!"

"Can't make it?"

"No. I'm telling the truth."

Ozerov suddenly brought his fist down on the map.

"We'll get through!" he shouted in a paroxysm of rage, and his narrowed eyes blazed a hot blue. "What seems impossible to you is possible for us. We'll pass through just these places where there are so many of your troops! And this very night we'll be at the line of the front!"

VII

The afternoon turned out unexpectedly clear and sunny. Here and there in the low places that had been shrouded in mist large and small settlements dotted with spreading willows came into view; low trails of greyish smoke spread from

them in the fitful wind. The rolling fields of the Moscow area suddenly began to glisten as though coated with glaze. The lone and homeless crows that had been perching meditatively on abandoned threshing sheds and haystacks took wing against the wind. The fields were so bright that when a hare bounded out of the weeds the eye tired watching as it flashed across. Even from the road one could make out the pansies and pink clusters of winterberries in the stubble.

Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann, looking like a monk in his long black raincoat, strode along a deserted bumpy road. At his heels marched a sergeant major and two German privates with tommy guns, while a short distance behind followed a large noisy column of Russians in dirty padded jackets and ragged greatcoats. They were unarmed. On their backs dangled empty knapsacks, helmets and sooty messtins. These were Ozerov's men. They marched along by companies. Behind each company two German wagons drawn by a pair of sturdy truck horses rattled over the frozen earth; spades and picks stuck out from under the canvas covers of many of the wagons. On both sides of the column and behind it marched German soldiers armed with rifles, tommy guns and even light machine guns.

Fighting the wind, Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann climbed to the crest of a steep rise. In the big sun-

flooded hollow ahead lay a village. From the rise he could clearly see groups of German soldiers wandering over the sites of burned-out houses in the village and dark German tanks moving about.

A lowslung sedan camouflaged in greyish-yellow autumn tones bounced over the road from the village toward the column. When it drew close, Rudolf Mitmann turned to face it, bringing his heels together with a click, and raised two fingers to his cap. The brakes squealed. The door opened and an elderly, grizzled German officer in a cap with an unusually high crown and a cape with a collar of marten fur leaned out.

"Prisoners?" he asked, breathing heavily.

"Yes, Herr Colonel."

"Where are you taking them?"

"To the positions of the 47th Infantry Division, Herr Colonel," Mitmann replied quickly and distinctly. "Near Yelovka."

"To use in an attack?"

"To build fortifications, Herr Colonel."

"Oh-h." The colonel sounded disappointed. "You may go." He slammed the door.

As the car drove by the guards began to wave their guns and hurry Ozerov's men on with shouts of "*Vorwärts*!" to demonstrate their zeal to the high-ranking officer in it.

Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann started down the slope toward the village with long strides, swinging his

arms. "Who was that?" the bulky sergeant major walking behind asked him. "Do you know?"

Mitmann turned around quickly. "The commander of a tank regiment. It is stationed in this village. I think he must have suffered sizable losses in the recent fighting."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the sergeant major. "Lead on."

This was Captain Ozerov.

. . . Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann was dumbfounded when Captain Ozerov, after guaranteeing him and his men their lives, demanded that they lead his regiment through to the forward lines in the guise of prisoners being sent up to build fortifications. Rudolf Mitmann was very much afraid of death, and so he quickly agreed, although not without misgivings.

Unloaded rifles were then issued to the German prisoners. They were strictly forbidden to talk to anybody they met on the way; all they were allowed to do was hurry the men in the column along when they encountered Germans. About twenty of Ozerov's men were put into German uniforms and issued various German arms. Thus Ozerov built up an "escort" for his regiment. All the others piled their weapons on the captured German wagons and covered them with tarpaulins; for appearances' sake they put spades and picks they had collected in the village in some of the

wagons. Ozerov decided to have two wagons with arms follow each company, against any eventuality. If the necessity arose, Ozerov's men could arm themselves and be ready for action in a few seconds.

The heavily wounded and the sick could no longer be left in Sukhaya Polyana, but the morose woman of the house in which Stepan Dyatlov had died—Praskovya Mikheyevna was her name, she had announced in parting—asked that they be entrusted to her care nevertheless. They were put in peasant carts and Praskovya Mikheyevna, pointing with her whip to the forest into which she would take them, promised earnestly:

"We'll save them. We've got friends everywhere there."

"Long life to you, Mikheyevna!" Ozerov said.

"Thanks. The same to you."

Ozerov's regiment set out from Sukhaya Polyana without delaying a minute longer. Time was precious, more so than it had ever been since the beginning of the march. There was not a minute to lose, for by nightfall, before von Grott learned about the rout of his company, they had to pass through the zone of open country where there was a big concentration of German troops and enter the large forest beyond which lay the front.

The regiment moved ahead quickly.

The colonel in the car was the first German they met on the way from Sukhaya Polyana. Ozerov's men were not afraid of this meeting, but still they experienced a certain degree of nervousness as they braced themselves for it. When it all went so simply and smoothly their spirits took a noticeable rise. Some even started to banter.

"A lop-eared people, those Germans!"

"Did we fool them!"

"Sure, they're lubbers!"

But when they saw that the village their column was approaching was occupied by a big German unit they fell silent again. Involuntarily they closed ranks, and they clattered over the bumpy road still faster.

One of the wagons was driven by Semyon Degtyarev. In it, covered with a German cape-tent camouflaged to resemble yellowing leaves, lay Andrei. After the battle Andrei had felt worse than before. When he learned, however, that all the wounded and the sick were being left in the woods near Sukhaya Polyana he mustered his last ounce of strength, took his place in the ranks and marched out of the village in the column. But his strength soon failed him. After marching four kilometres he fainted. He was put in Semyon Degtyarev's wagon. Consciousness returned quickly, but he was so weak that only rarely was he able to raise himself up to look out at his comrades

and at the fields of the Moscow area, which were so sunny that day.

A startlingly tall soldier in a German greatcoat that came only to his knees ran up to the side of the wagon. He leaned over it and sniffed his broad fleshy nose, holding his tommy gun against his chest.

"Is that you, Ivan?" Andrei asked.

"Ha-ha, didn't recognize me?" Umrikhin grinned.

"H'm, what a mug you've got! Pure German!" Andrei said, for some reason irritably. "I'd just like to give you one in that mug!"

"Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Umrikhin roared. "Look like one, do I?"

"The spit image. Go away. Makes me sick to look at you."

As usual, Umrikhin did not take offence. "It's a good thing I do look like one—makes it easier for me. But for you it's harder. Here's this village now. . . ."

Degtyarev turned to join in the conversation. "So what? Trying to scare us again? I'll wrap these reins across your snout, you bean pole, and then you'll beat it fast enough. Do you hear?"

"What's the matter? You really scared?"

Semyon Degtyarev scanned the column of men marching behind the wagon, searching for someone. "What a pity! Wonder where our sergeant is."

"Yurgin? There he is, walking behind."

"Why doesn't he give you a good calling down, Ivan?"

"He has already," Umrikhin confessed.

"Then come a little closer."

"What for?"

"These reins of mine are a bit short. I can't reach your snout from here." Degtyarev was really angry now. "It wasn't you, you fool, who planned how we'd get through. Our captain himself, Comrade Ozerov, planned it. And once he's leading, you just keep walking and don't complain. And leave the sick man alone."

Umrikhin listened to Degtyarev's outburst in silence as he walked beside the cart. The burnished German tommy gun dangled against his chest like a toy.

"Only don't get sore," Degtyarev wound up good-naturedly. "After all, Ivan, you deserve a calling down. You seem to be a decent soldier all around, and then you start wailing—like a bittern in a swamp."

"I'm not sore. To tell the truth, I feel better when I'm bawled out. Heart feels lighter. I really am a little scared," he admitted simply. "And when someone bawls me out I stop feeling scared. See, I feel better already." He looked ahead. "Oh, pretty close we are!"

Stepping away from the wagon and entering

into his role of guard, he brandished his tommy gun. His spirits rose.

"Shneher, you bastards!" he shouted playfully in a wild, hoarse voice.

"What's all the noise for?" Degtyarev raised himself in his seat. "Shut your trap, you bean pole, and keep it shut! Besides, what you shout is 'shneler.'"

"Ah, go on!" Umrikhin waved his tommy gun. "I come from Berlin myself."

The column entered the village.

Suddenly Andrei raised himself.

"Lie down, you," Degtyarev whispered.

"No," Andrei protested, "I want to have a look at them."

The column marched in silence down the main street of the village behind Ober-Lieutenant Mitmann and Captain Ozerov. The men had expected that the column would immediately attract the Germans' attention and they would at least ask where it was going. But Ozerov had counted on this not happening, and it did not. This was a time when Russian prisoners were being driven not only to the west but to the east, to the front, to dig trenches, build dugouts and serve as screens for attacking German infantry. The Germans calmly went about their business paying no attention to the column of Russians, a common enough sight: they fussed around the anti-aircraft guns and tanks

stationed in every yard and garden, pulled down fences for firewood, dragged various articles they found hidden in pits and in homes over to their trucks, gathered in groups and talked, lit up their pipes.... Only rarely did a German who happened to be near the road stop to cast an indifferent glance over the column.

The men quickly calmed down.

Andrei took in the Germans with eager eyes. Hitherto he had met them only in battle. But to see the enemy army in battle is one thing and to see it in everyday life quite another. Here it was easier to get an idea of what it was like, to gauge its strength and fighting power. Andrei was very glad that he could see the German army in non-combatant surroundings.

In one of the yards that had no fence he saw several mutilated German tanks; they had gaps in their sides that looked like gopher holes, smashed turrets and mangled treads sunk in the mud. One of the tanks had evidently been set on fire in battle; the flames had licked the paint from the armour in many places, and the yellow swastika they had touched looked like a huge tarantula twisted in death agony.

"See?" Andrei tugged at the back of Degtyarev's coat. "See that?" His eyes and his perspiring face burned with a single dominating thought. "German iron can't take it, eh? Got twisted?"

"Keep quiet, you! Just look and shut up."

Many of the Germans had a shabby, bedraggled appearance. They were beginning to suffer from the cold. Forgetting all about military bearing they wandered dejectedly about the village, unshaven, stooped, the crumpled skirts of their thin greatcoats flapping loosely. Some were already wearing not only men's but also women's garb which they had taken from the peasants or found in the abandoned villages: old sheepskin coats with gathered waists, lambskin hats, coloured scarfs and coarse hand-knitted mittens.

"See that, Semyon? See?" Andrei whispered excitedly, turning and twisting. "So that's what they're like! Like regular bandits! See?"

"Shut up, Andrei! Just look and keep quiet!"

In the yard of the last house in the village Andrei saw a large number of birch crosses neatly stacked against a shed. "Things are going bad for them, Semyon," he said, falling back exhausted.

"Fought themselves out!" Semyon replied. "They're down to the bottom of the barrel. You can see it. Well, Andrei, you just wait.... When our boys get going they'll flatten them out! Yes, Andrei, we'll be coming back through these places yet. Our time will come!" Now he was carried away by his words. "Our hour will come! And will it be an hour! Yes, we'll show them a thing or two!"

The column moved on toward another village.

VIII

Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann conducted Ozerov's regiment not along the main road leading to the sector of the front held by the German 47th Division but along small country roads where fewer reserve troops were stationed. Toward sunset they met only rare ambulances and single carts. At nightfall, following a faint, rarely used cart track, they entered a big, autumn-frayed forest of mixed trees. Here, in the deserted forest, there was utter silence.

"On the other side of the forest are your positions," Mitmann announced.

Ozerov called a halt.

The wagons were left in the road. The men walked off to the sides, dropped wearily to the ground beside trees and began to gulp down the remains of the bread and canned goods they had captured in the fighting at Sukhaya Polyana. They conversed cautiously, in muffled voices, keeping their ears attuned to the silence of the forest. The glowing ends of their cigarettes they hid in their sleeves.

Night had descended in a calm. It grew warmer. The Milky Way glittered in the sky like a vein of gold. Clusters of stars hung low over the earth. Inside the forest there was the stillness that sets in only infrequently in the frontal zone. Then somewhere in the distance a machine gun broke into a

chatter, as though wishing to reassure itself in the absolute quiet.

Captain Ozerov climbed into one of the wagons, took off the German uniform and put on his own. "Breeches!" he whispered to Petya Uralets, his inseparable orderly. "Boots!"

While dressing he talked in a low voice with Rudolf Mitmann, who stood near the back of the wagon quickly chewing down a slice of bread.

"Your regiment held this sector?"

"Yes," Mitmann replied. "Just on the other side of this forest."

"To whom did you turn over your positions?"

"They were taken over by a separate battalion of engineers, Herr Captain," Mitmann replied, finishing the bread and now feeling somewhat more cheerful after the tiring march. "You see, the commander of the division marked this sector as totally unsuitable for an offensive. The roads leading to the forest, as you saw, are very poor, and inside the forest they are still worse. There are many swamps here. It is impossible to concentrate a large body of troops with heavy armaments on this sector, particularly during the autumn rains. The Russian troops our regiment came into contact with have much more advantageous positions: a chain of elevations that are excellent for defence purposes. When the hopelessness of continuing to attack on this sector became evident, our regiment,

as one which had suffered losses, was moved back to the rear and a battalion of engineers placed here temporarily. Solely to guard the sector. The massing of troops for new battles, as I told you along the way, is taking place quite a distance to the north of this forest."

"That means this is the junction of two divisions?"

"Quite correct, Herr Captain."

Ozerov was pulling on his boots with difficulty.

"Now it should be clear to you, Herr Captain," Mitmann continued meanwhile, "that I cannot lead you any farther. Prisoners sent to the forward units for various purposes are usually taken to staff headquarters. Only then, and under special escort, are they allowed to proceed farther, to the forward lines. For obvious reasons I cannot walk into the headquarters of the battalion of engineers. And it seems to me that there is nothing for you to do there either. From here on you must go through by yourselves. And I warn you at the start: although the battalion is quite scattered, you will not, of course, be able to avoid a skirmish."

Ozerov climbed down from the wagon.

"Everything is clear," he said. "Where are your men?"

The German prisoners came up.

"Well," Ozerov began, straightening his clothes

and feeling in his pockets. "You have done your job, and now you will—"

Mitmann recoiled. "Herr Captain!"

"Don't interrupt me! I don't like it!" Then he continued in a low voice, "And now you will be able to convince yourselves that a Russian officer is as good as his word. When we go on you will remain here. You will be free. You may go wherever you wish. Only turn over your weapons right now."

One of the German soldiers, a short man, stepped forward out of the darkness and, turning to Ozerov, said quickly:

"I do not wish to go back. Herr Captain, may I proceed farther together with you?"

"Farther? To become a prisoner?"

"Yes, Herr Captain, I have always been sympathetic toward your country and had a different opinion of it than our Nazis. And I am very much against this war."

"What is your name?"

"Hans Langhut, a blast-furnace man from the Ruhr."

"All right," Ozerov agreed. "You will go with us."

The other soldiers spoke up out of the darkness:

"I also would like to—"

"Now it's better for us to go forward than back."

"At least we'll keep alive."

Rudolf Mitmann stood for a while in silence.

"Yes, they're right," he said at last. "We'll be shot tomorrow, of course. And you, Herr Captain, give us your word that our lives will be saved?"

"Yes. Like those of all prisoners."

"Oh, I believe you!" Mitmann exclaimed. "We'll go with you."

Ozerov smiled faintly in the darkness. "Excellent. Petya, take their guns and put them away, and turn the prisoners over to Battalion Commander Zhuravsky."

Commissar Yakhno came up. As he and Ozerov had agreed, he had brought up the rear all the way. When the halt was called he had set up posts, handed out from one of the wagons the remainder of the bread to the sergeant majors of the companies for distribution among the men, and then had made his way up through the forest, stopping to talk to the men under the trees. When he found Ozerov he gave his hand a hard squeeze—silently congratulating him on the success of their unusual sally—and immediately drew him away from the wagon.

"Let's go off to the side."

"You're a tireless walker," Ozerov remarked.

When he had heard all the news Yakhno grew enthusiastic.

"Now I'll walk in the lead, yes?"

"As you wish, Veniamin Petrovich."

"You know, old man, I just can't march in the rear!" the commissar exclaimed with feeling. "I realize that sometimes, like today, it is very important. But just the same I can't. It takes the heart out of me. How difficult it is to be the last one, isn't it?"

Suddenly the stars began to fade. A film of cloud covered the sky. Rain was coming up again out of the west. From the invisible reaches of the air came the distant mournful drone of motors: squadrons of German planes were on their way to bomb Moscow.

IX

The men took their guns from the wagons.

Andrei was awakened by the cold an hour before sunrise. He immediately sensed that the regiment was preparing to move. Soldiers kept running past him, and he heard muffled commands being given. Beside his wagon Umrikhin and Degtyarev were talking in excited whispers:

"We'll get through, Ivan. Don't you worry."

"Ah, Semyon, if we only do! Where will you be?"

"In the break-through group on the right."

"Better if you marched in the column."

"Can't. Got to say goodbye to those Germans."

Other men came up to the wagon. One bent over Andrei and prodded him.

"Well, Lopukhov? Feel better?"

Andrei recognized Captain Ozerov's voice.

"Comrade Captain!" he got out with difficulty, feeling a lump in his throat. "Don't leave me here, for heaven's sake!"

"No, no, of course not. Just calm down, old man." Ozerov straightened the German greatcoat someone had thrown over Andrei. "You lie quiet. We'll get you through. It's not far now. Sergeant Yurgin will ride along with you. His arm is bothering him and it's hard for him to walk in the dark. And you'll be driven by—" He turned toward where the horses were. "Who'll take them?"

"I've been ordered to, Comrade Captain," Umrikhin answered. "It's hard for me to walk too. I've got blisters from those damn German boots. They looked good but they turned out to be like iron."

"See you get them through!"

"Why, of course, Comrade Captain. I've hauled more important freight in my time. I was stableman on the kolkhoz for ten years. Even had a pedigreed stallion in my charge."

"Be careful, you'll answer for them with your head!"

Ozerov bent over the wagon again.

"Want to smoke?"

"I'd like to," Andrei confessed.

"Wait a minute, I'll roll you one." Ozerov reached for his pouch. "Just a little left. Well, now it'll last till we get there. . . ."

When Captain Ozerov had handed Andrei the lighted cigarette and left, Umrikhin suggested to his friend:

"Semyon, let's roll ourselves smokes too before we start out."

"But there isn't enough left for more than one."

"Well, let's smoke it up," Umrikhin said. "We won't have a chance to smoke on the way anyhow. And once we're going to join up with the army soon why save it? We'll have plenty then."

They lit up.

Soon after, Degtyarev said goodbye to his friends.

"A daredevil, that Semyon is!" Umrikhin exclaimed with approval and, for some reason, a touch of sadness, as his friend disappeared among the men crowding on the road. "There's a man a song ought to be written about, Andrei. A good song it'd be!"

As he passed down the column Ozerov ran into Yakhno.

"What do you say, Veniamin Petrovich?"

Yakhno glanced up at the overcast sky.

"It's time," he said.

"Good luck, then!"

The vanguard break-through group, headed by Yakhno, set out, and a few minutes later the column followed.

Andrei lay on his back looking up at the sky. It was overcast, starless. Within the forest it was still difficult to see that dawn was breaking. The column appeared to be moving along a crude trail instead of a road, for the wagon bumped over roots and fallen branches. At times the iron-rimmed wheels broke through the frozen surface of the trail and sank deep into the swampy soil, and then the horses struggled and strained to get them out. At times broad fir branches, barely discernible in the gloom, swept low across the wagon; rain was coming, and the firs had a strong, fresh smell, as in spring. At times underbrush in the path scraped across the bottom of the wagon.

Involuntarily Andrei recalled the night Captain Ozerov had led the small group of men to the Vazuza. There had been the same bleakness then as now. And the forest had been just as silent and frowning, as though it grew in some underground place inhabited by neither man, beast nor fowl. But now Andrei did not experience the fear he had then. He knew the advance detachment was headed by Yakhno, the commissar of the regiment, and that the column was led by Captain Ozerov. His boundless faith in these men, in their courage and fortitude, filled his heart with peace. He knew

that these two men would lead the regiment across the front line.

But Andrei was impatient. The thought that he could not walk caused him anguish. How he wanted to pull himself together, jump down from the wagon and march along with his comrades, so as to get across to his army as soon as possible!... Now he would throw back his head to catch a glimpse of Umrikhin, who was constantly flicking the horses with the reins, now raise himself on his elbow to look at Matvei Yurgin, who was sitting silently in the back of the wagon, and he kept whispering:

"Soon now, fellows?"

His friends calmed him with:

"Soon, Andrei, soon."

"Just lie there quiet."

Andrei rapidly became more and more feverish. His eyes burned. His lips grew dry. He began to throw off the greatcoat.

"Faster!" he whispered. "Why've they stopped? What for? Must go faster.... Ivan, drive faster, faster. Why are you standing still?"

"He's beginning to rave," Yurgin remarked.

Andrei did not hear the shots that rang out to the right of the column or see the green rocket swish upward into the paling sky from that spot like a bird frightened from her nest. He only felt the wagon move. It began to jolt frequently. Wav-

ing the reins, Umrikhin accidentally flicked Andrei twice, but the latter said nothing: at last they were moving! At one point Andrei heard shots, but he paid no attention to them; he did not ask himself who was shooting or where—he gave himself up completely to the sensation of rapid motion. He waited a while and shouted again, but this time joyfully:

"Soon?"

Just then the wagon jerked sharply, the shaft struck something, and they came to a stop. As though in a dream, Andrei heard loud voices:

"Oh-h, what rotten luck!"

"Killed? Who's killed?"

"A horse's killed!"

X

Degtyarev clutched at the straggly tufts of grass to pull himself up and immediately recalled that this was the second time he was trying. Why? What was wrong? A wave of agonizing pain swept over his body, and Degtyarev realized what had happened to him. "Did they get through or not?" he wondered. "Must have." But he was unable to ponder any longer: the pain was so intense that it confused things in his mind. His hands were all right. That was good. The toes of his right foot moved easily inside his boot. But the left leg was heavy and hot; it felt like a burning log.

The first thing Degtyarev wanted to do was get away from the place where the German bullets had knocked him off his feet. He sensed that no one was around and he could no longer hear any firing, but somehow that spot was terrifying. The idea that he must hurry away from there was so strong that he almost forgot his pain as he began to crawl in the direction he imagined the edge of the forest to be.

He crawled along, grasping convulsively at the grass and dragging his burning left leg behind him. He came to some sort of a pit and felt around the edge of it with his fingers. Then he turned left but quickly realized that he had made a mistake: it would have been easier to go around the pit from the right. When he tried to do this his wounded leg caught on an exposed root and sent a fiery pang right to his heart. He cried out and, almost unconscious, pulled up his leg. He was not crying, nor did he wish to cry, but big tears rolled down his cheeks. Holding on to the edge of the pit, he gazed through his tears into the gloom of early morning and then, summoning his strength, whispered:

"And here's a grave. . . ."

He had whispered these words without thinking, in the same way one flings a handful of coppers on a counter. But when the sound of them sank into his consciousness he recoiled from the pit.

A new thought—the thought of life—proved even stronger than the first one, the one that had driven

him from the terrifying spot. He now felt that he possessed more strength than he actually had. Breathing heavily, he hurriedly crawled forward, confident that he was crawling east, his goal the past few weeks.

He crawled on, trembling from head to foot and frequently falling flat to catch his breath, and managed somehow to reach a clearing. In the clearing stood a ramshackle little house; all the outbuildings around it had been wrecked. Degtyarev raised himself on shaking arms and, exerting all his strength, shouted in what was almost a loud voice:

"Hey, folks!"

No one answered. He shouted again, but this time, for some reason, not even the deep forest silence echoed his cry.

He realized that there was not a single living soul in this tumbledown forest hut. But nevertheless, after a rest he crawled toward it; he had always been accustomed to believe that where there was a house there was life. Laboriously, with frequent cries of pain, he dragged himself up on the porch and slowly pushed open the door. An oppressive dampness and a musty uninhabited odour struck him in the face from out of the darkness, and he started back from the door. But a minute later he opened it once more, and this time, lest the deserted smell frighten him again, he rolled himself over the threshold. Another stab of pain shot through

his heart. Unconsciously he emitted a shriek, horrible as only a man's shriek can be.

When the pain subsided the odours of the deserted house came to him even stronger. And then he heard a familiar sound in the tomblike silence. It seemed so incongruous in the midst of that deathly stillness and desolation that he pressed close to the wall and held his breath. Then he said out loud, in order to hear his own voice:

"A clock."

The war had driven out the inhabitants of this house. Perhaps they abandoned it in a panic, snatching up whatever came to hand. And had forgotten about the clock. When was this? It must have been about a week ago—silence and the air of desolation had already had time to settle. But the clock, wound by the hand of its owner, was still going, ticking clearly and rhythmically, as it had ticked when normal, peaceful life went on in the house.

"A clock," Degtyarev repeated.

He crept closer to the wall on which the clock hung. Drinking in with his entire being the caressing warmth of the ticking, he pressed a cheek wet with tears and sweat to the floor. "A seven-day clock," he thought. "Like the one at home." Soothed, he fell into a doze.

A little later Degtyarev awoke with a start and raised himself on his elbow. The ticking was barely audible. Then there was a click inside the mecha-

nism, and a rattle, just as though the clock were choking in the stuffiness of the deserted house, and it fell silent. For a long time he strained his ears; he kept expecting the clock to clear its throat, like a living thing, and then resume its ticking. Breathing became difficult. His head was hot and heavy; he felt that all he had to do was move it and it would jingle like a tambourine all hung with copper coins and bells. And there was a rattling in his chest, like the one he had just heard in the clock. "I'm dying," he thought. "The spring has run down." Then, realizing that he was about to die amidst the stillness of the forest, he began to claw at his chest in terror. At that moment he noticed a strong beam of light coming from one side of his body. What could it be? The flashlight at his belt, about which he had completely forgotten, had gone on. He unfastened it and in the circle of light saw an old wall clock with chains and weights and a big, moon-shaped pendulum.

Degtyarev's strength was failing fast, and he knew it. There was the rattling in his chest; the hot stabs in his heart were growing stronger. Now the ringing of a heavy copper bell had taken the place of the light tinkle in his head. But, gasping for breath, he started to raise himself. The floor under him was damp and sticky. "Blood," Degtyarev realized, but he did not give up his idea. Each movement cost him excruciating pain, but he

gritted his teeth and climbed up on a trunk standing against the wall. Then he closed his eyes and rested for a long time with his head against the window frame. The faint beam of the flashlight on the floor bathed his pale, sweating face.

Suddenly a shudder ran through his body at the thought that he might not have time to do what he had planned. He braced his hands on the window sill and pulled himself up onto his right knee. At that moment he saw more clearly than before that his strength was ebbing. Quickly, almost in desperation, he caught the chain and jerked it downward. The weights banged against the wall. Now he had barely any strength left. Afraid he would not be able to hold himself there a few seconds more, he pressed up against the wall and began to fumble about feverishly for the pendulum, which he could no longer see. As he pushed it he crumpled onto the trunk.

He lay there motionless, feeling no pain, his eyes closed in utter exhaustion, his face green in the ray of the flashlight, and listened to the rhythmic ticking of the clock.

XI

When they had put about a kilometre between themselves and the forest in which they had had the brief skirmish with the Germans, Captain Ozerov stopped the column in a deep hollow for a while

to wait until all the men came up. Everybody hurried, for the fields were quickly growing light and the Germans might spot the column hiding in the hollow and start shelling it. They had to get going as soon as possible.

Umrikhin, aided by Matvei Yurgin, dragged Andrei over to the hollow along the ground on a strip of canvas. A minute after Andrei was laid into another wagon he recovered consciousness and opened his eyes. A cloudy morning was dawning over the hollow. He could hear footsteps and muffled voices nearby. A man was bending over the wagon, snuffling loudly; his body shook and he kept turning his head from side to side. Andrei recognized Umrikhin. He parted his dry lips and said:

"Where are we, Ivan? Have we crossed over?"

Umrikhin straightened up and turned his face away.

"Who knows? Some say we have already...."

"Crossed over? But—but what are you crying about?"

"I feel bad about Semyon."

"Semyon?"

"They say he was killed."

Noticing that Andrei was in a sweat, Umrikhin bent over him and carefully wiped his forehead and temples with a bit of dirty rag.

"Oh, Andrei!" he whispered, screwing up his face and controlling his quivering lips. "Our Sem-

nyon's left behind." Again he turned his face away. "Now there's nobody to bawl me out. A fellow like that—he was worth more than anything! For every drop of his blood we ought to kill one of those bandits! And even that wouldn't be enough. Well, what do you want? He was a Party man. And he was young—bucked life like he was bucking the wind. The first time in my life I listened to such a young fellow as if he was older than me, and it didn't hurt."

"What are you babbling about?" Andrei asked weakly. "Who killed him?"

"If you can't remember anything lay there quiet and don't bother me. Just say thanks for dragging you out."

Matvei Yurgin came up.

"Well, found out?" Umrikhin asked him. "Have we crossed over?"

Yurgin straightened his arm in the sling.

"We don't know yet."

"What do you mean? Isn't this our side of the front?"

"Nothing is known yet, Ivan."

Nobody in the column could make out whether they had crossed the front or not. At that time the Germans still did not wish to believe that their October offensive on Moscow had been frustrated. Hence they had no intention of setting up a clearly delineated front; they dug in most unwillingly, in extreme cases, when our troops blocked their way

with particular stubbornness. On our side, however, the line of the front was becoming more and more distinct. On some sectors our forces were retreating, giving up villages; on others they were withdrawing of their own accord to more advantageous positions. But all our forces near Moscow were working toward one and the same objective: to stop the enemy, consolidate their positions and build up a firm defence line.

According to Rudolf Mitmann, there were Russian advance posts on the first small elevations beyond the hollow in which the column was hiding from the Germans. While the men of the regiment were gathering in the hollow a patrol headed by Commissar Yakhno reached those heights. But it found no Russian posts there. The shallow trenches and the dugouts were empty; all around lay heaps of rusty cartridge cases.

Yakhno soon returned, highly agitated. "It's bad!" he said to Ozerov, pitching his voice low so that nobody else should hear. He wiped the sweat from his face. "There's nobody there!"

They called Mitmann over. He again confirmed that five days earlier advance Russian posts had been stationed on those heights. Ozerov realized that in the five days of Mitmann's absence big changes had taken place on this sector.

"What's happened?" he asked Yakhno. He was also obviously agitated. "Have they withdrawn?"

"I can't understand it."

"You saw no dead men in the trenches?"

"No."

"That means they withdrew voluntarily," Ozerov concluded with confidence. "But in that case where are the Germans? In the forest we met only a small group. Maybe when the Germans saw our forces draw back they moved up after them, and that group left in the forest was some sort of service unit. Maybe we're only approaching the real line of the front."

Captain Ozerov cast his eye over the column. Even in the hollow, where the dusk lingered longest, it was growing light. Now strips of winter grain, abandoned shocks and lone rose-brier and acacia bushes could be seen on the rises in the earth for a big distance around.

Yakhno frowned. "Yes, it's quite light."

"Set out!" Ozerov ordered in an expressionless voice. "If there are Germans ahead, by this time they've been warned about us from the rear. There'll be only one thing left for us: to fight our way through. We can't delay here."

"I'm off," said Yakhno, pulling on his gloves.

The regiment moved out of the hollow.

As they marched up the gentle slope of the elevation many of the men and officers of the regiment cast anxious glances back. Soon the dark band of the forest at the fringe of which the skir-

mish had taken place an hour earlier came into view. Now the Germans in the forest would surely notice the big column moving up. Fire from German batteries at the edge of the forest was to be expected any minute.

But the Germans were silent.

A winding trench smashed in places by shells came into view on the slope; from it communication trenches sprouted eastward. The first company followed Yakhno's small group across the trench, went over the ridge and started to hurry down the eastern slope, which was also scarred with communication trenches and slits and dotted with the little mounds of dugouts. Now that the men of the first company could no longer be seen from the forest they livened up visibly and became cheerful; they did not know that the main danger might still lie ahead. But Captain Ozerov was worried. Casually he unbuttoned the collar of his padded jacket.

From the east, beyond the second range of heights, which were wooded, came the muffled bark of a gun, and a few seconds later the men heard the whine of a shell. It threw up a cloud of earth a hundred metres to the right of the column, and an instant later a second shell whistled past. This one crashed into the hillside to the left; a huge black mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke rose from the place of the explosion. Then Commissar

Yakhno's high-pitched, happy voice rang out over the height:

"Comrades, those are our guns! Hurrah!"

Commissar Yakhno was not an army man by profession and hence Ozerov could not make out whether he had simply guessed that those were our guns or had only said it to keep the men from getting panicky. After the two explosions Ozerov himself felt certain that the fire was coming from one of our batteries. This meant that the observation post had taken them for Germans launching a sudden attack in the dusk of early morning without artillery preparation. As Yakhno's voice faded away Captain Ozerov turned and cried out at the top of his lungs:

"Those are ours! Ours! Into the slits!"

Nobody heard the third shell. It burst in front of the column. Out of the smoke, which obscured the range of wooded elevations, invisible shell fragments whistled over the column.

Commissar Yakhno toppled over backwards. Not understanding what could have happened to him in that moment of great joy, he lifted himself up, gazed eagerly at the east and cried out again:

"They're ours!" His voice broke. "Ours! We got through!" He fell back again with a smile on his lips and closed his eyes.

Cries rent the air. The men scattered in all directions. Fortunately there were trenches and dug-

outs all around. The shells burst more frequently. Smoke shrouded the entire height.

The greater part of the column had not yet come to the ridge and was thus sheltered from the fire of our guns. As soon as the shelling started everybody on the western slope also made for the trenches and slits.

A minute before the shelling the front wheels of the wagon in which Andrei lay had got stuck in a half-smashed trench the column was crossing, and the horses could not pull them out. When he heard the explosions Yurgin immediately forgot about his wounded arm. Now he burned with the ardour he always experienced in battle.

"Get Andrei!" he ordered, running up to the wagon.

Umrikhin picked Andrei up and dragged him into a trench. Frightened by the explosions, the horses suddenly jerked the wheels free and, not realizing at first where the danger lay, galloped toward the ridge. Then they swerved and charged down the hillside with the wagon clattering after.

Andrei could not grasp what had happened. Shells were bursting all over the height, and there were the cries and groans of men. In the moments between explosions he could hear his friends, who were shielding him with their bodies, shouting happily:

"Our guns are shooting, ours!"

"Andrei, those are ours!"

Andrei thought his friends had gone mad: shells were crashing down on all sides yet they hugged each other and laughed and cried with joy....

Meanwhile Captain Ozerov had leaped out of his trench and was dashing forward. Crouching from time to time, he ran with long, heavy strides to get out of the zone of fire. The shells burst to the sides and shrapnel whistled over his head but he ran on and on without stopping. When he had almost reached the foot of the hill he stopped abruptly, and over him, as if he had raised fiery wings, fluttered the gold-embroidered banner of the regiment.

XII

Ozerov's regiment was disposed in a large village not far from Moscow. The unit holding down that sector had already informed staff headquarters of the Nth Army that the regiment had passed across the front, and when Ozerov arrived in the village he was immediately summoned to the radio hut.

First the general in command of the army spoke with him, and then Major General Borodin. This came as a total surprise to Ozerov. It appeared that Borodin's division, of which the regiment was part, was holding down the adjacent sector, a little to the north of where Ozerov's men had crossed the

front. Ozerov was overjoyed: the regiment could thus rejoin its division without delay. After reporting in brief on the state of his regiment to the division commander, Captain Ozerov said he would like to appear at once and give a detailed report, but General Borodin replied that he would visit the regiment himself as soon as a conference at army headquarters ended. He gave strict orders not to disturb the men or make any preparations whatever for his arrival.

"Gold glitters even in the mud," he said.

... A fine grey autumn drizzle began. It was in no hurry to soak the earth; it probably knew it had plenty of time at its disposal for that. Mist shut out the horizon. A flock of sparrows scattered from the lilac bushes, the leaves of which, though nipped by frost, were still green.

Captain Ozerov was going through Yakhno's papers. The shell fragment had hit the commissar in the region of the heart. It had pierced the edge of his tunic pocket and gone through his Party card and other papers, which were soaked with blood. There was also blood on the snapshots of his wife and son. Ozerov studied the snapshots for a long time. Yakhno's wife had abundant dark hair and big eyes with such a direct and forceful expression that Ozerov hastily turned his gaze away.... The commissar's son, a shock-headed youngster of five who looked as though he had his father's in-

tensity, sat at a little round table holding a big sun-kissed apple in each hand. The commissar's family lived in Moscow. "How can I ever write to them?" Ozerov thought with an ache in his heart. "And I must write today. How can I ever deal them such a blow?" He put the papers into a map case and handed it to Petya Uralets.

"Are they making the coffin?" he asked.

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

"And the grave?"

Uralets turned his face to the wall. "It's being dug."

"Where are the pebbles? Let me have them."

Hiding his swollen, tear-filled eyes from Ozerov, Petya Uralets poured a heap of coloured little stones onto the table from his pocket. Commissar Yakhno had carried them all the way from the Vazuza.

Captain Ozerov fingered the pebbles and, unclenching his jaws, said:

"He was keeping them for his son. Take care of them. When we get a chance we'll send them."

"I'll take care of them, Comrade Captain."

"He looks just like he's alive," Petya Uralets said as he scooped the pebbles up from the table. "Lying there smiling. To bury a man like that scares me. I never thought a man could die with a smile."

Ozerov rose. He stood by the table for a minute in silence, his head bowed, as though standing before Yakhno's grave.

"He was a true Bolshevik, Petya," he said at last, raising his eyes. "A man of great faith. With the faith in our cause that he had, Petya, it's easy to live and it's easy to die. Only it's hard to part with men like him. . . ."

A car drew up in front of the house.

"The general!" a messenger hastily announced.

Ozerov went out to greet the division commander.

General Borodin, in a silvery grey greatcoat that was almost the same colour as his hair, sprang lightly down from the car. Before Ozerov could utter a word the general threw his arms around his neck, pressed him close and kissed him hard three times on his chapped, wind-beaten lips. Then he pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of his greatcoat and, noticing that a small crowd had already collected around the steps and was staring at him in surprise, shouted angrily, twitching his pointed, grizzled moustache:

"Well, what are you staring at me for? Stop it! You think that once I'm a general I—Don't look!" he shouted again. When he had wiped his eyes he pointed to Ozerov. "He is the one to look at! Look, marvel, and envy his happiness! He has already shown how a man should serve his country and be loyal to his army!" With these words the

general flung open his greatcoat and strode into the house.

In the front room he immediately took off his coat and, silently refusing Ozerov's offer of assistance, hung it on a nail himself; he intended to make a long stay with the regiment. Rubbing his hands the way old men do, he surveyed Ozerov, as though trying to determine how he had changed in the month since their meeting on the bank of the Vazuza. The general was very pleased to note that there was nothing about Ozerov's appearance to indicate his long and arduous march: his tunic and breeches were neatly pressed, his boots shone, his cheeks were freshly shaven, and there was even a strong scent of eau de cologne about him. "So he hasn't forgotten the remark I made at the Vazuza," the general observed with satisfaction.

"Chypre?" he suddenly asked, twitching his moustache.

"Exactly, Comrade General."

"Hmm.... Where'd you pick it up? I like Chypre."

"I can present you with a bottle, Comrade General."

"No, don't bother, don't bother."

He took Ozerov's hands in his and finally said what he had wanted to say the first thing on entering the house:

"Well, thanks, old man, for everything, for everything! You acted like a true Russian. I thank you. I am proud to have such officers in my division!"

Ozerov drew himself up before the general.

"I serve the Soviet Union, Comrade General!"

"You serve it well! Very well, Comrade Major!"

Ozerov opened his mouth to speak, but General Borodin stopped him with a gesture:

"Major! I know your rank better than you do!" He searched in his trouser pocket and drew out four little metal rectangles covered with ruby enamel. "Accept these new insignia. Your promotion has gone through. Put them on right now, and then we'll talk."

General Borodin talked with Ozerov about two hours. He questioned him in detail about the battle the regiment had fought while the rest of the division was crossing the Vazuza, about how it had made its way east, about the present condition of the men, their needs, and what had to be done to restore the regiment's fighting power quickly and completely. The general ordered the wounded and sick to be sent to field hospitals at once. All the others were to be given a three-day full rest. That same day the men were to have a bath, be issued new uniforms, and fed as much as they could eat. He announced that on orders from the commander of the army, trucks with complete outfits and food

for the regiment would arrive in the village by evening. After it had rested, the regiment would move up to the sector held by the division and receive the replacements and armaments it needed.

"All your rear services, by the way," the general announced, "are with the division. I have already informed them of the regiment's arrival."

"How are they, Comrade General?"

"In full order. They were with us all the time."

General Borodin rose from his chair near the little iron stove, at which he had been warming his knees, and sat down at the table. A large, dented copper samovar was now steaming away noisily on the table—Petya Uralets knew that the general was a big tea drinker. The general poured his own cup and then, glancing up at Ozerov, asked:

"I suppose now you're waiting for me to speak?"

"I am, Comrade General."

"So I see."

Drinking the hot tea in small sips, General Borodin described how the division had retreated from the Vazuza after eluding the German pincers; how, while withdrawing, it had engaged the enemy on every convenient line and inflicted heavy losses on him. The general was having obvious difficulty in controlling his emotion. He rose from the table without finishing his tea.

"Historians," he said, pacing the room, "will study our October retreat with amazement and

with just as much interest as victorious offensive operations are studied! What I observed in our army during the October days may be considered a miracle! Yes, I say this in all earnestness. As you know, it is considered a commonplace occurrence for the worst human traits to come out in the soldiery during such a difficult retreat, and in the final analysis this turns the troops into a herd. But with us the opposite took place. Never was our fighting man so pure as in those days of noble deeds in the name of his country!"

The general stopped near the window, and Ozerov noticed that he was barely holding back tears, so overcome was he by his recollections, his admiration for his men, and his grief for the fallen.

"During the years of Soviet power," he continued, "new traits have appeared in our men: these are exceptional fidelity to our country's great cause, the feeling of collectivism, and a sense of responsibility for the destiny of the entire world. When I look at our soldiers now, the breath of spring and of youth fills my heart: how great are the people our country has given birth to! The whole world should gaze upon our men with admiration and learn from them how to perform one's duty as a human being."

A group of soldiers walked past the house. They were in wet, dirty greatcoats and broken shoes, and they plodded through the mud wearily, but their

faces as they talked were happy and animated. General Borodin followed them with his eyes until they disappeared down a side street. Then he shifted his gaze to a rain-washed lilac bush in the front garden.

"Strange," he suddenly said in a reflective tone. "One would think that lilac leaves are made of the same stuff as the leaves of other trees. But the leaves of other trees turned yellow and fell a long time ago, while the lilac bushes are still green. And you know"—he turned to face Ozerov, who had come up to the window—"the lilac leaves remain that way right up to winter. And when they do fall they are still green! Isn't that wonderful?"

He turned away from the window. "Line up your regiment," he suddenly ordered.

"Yes, Comrade General," Ozerov replied. "May I ask if you will speak to the men?"

"I wish to bow to your men."

XIII

Andrei was sitting on a block of wood in front of a little iron stove. The damp fir logs in the stove smouldered, refusing to burn. It was cool and quiet in the tent, and there was a strong odour of medicines. Through the patch of isinglass, half of which was shaded by a fir branch, came the grey light of a November morning. A dull rumble sound-

ed in the distance, as though big empty barrels were being rolled around.

Early that morning all the sick and wounded men in the tent had been evacuated to hospitals in the rear by ambulance. Only Andrei was left, and he felt miserable at being alone. "Dammit, what a dull place!" he muttered, poking the wood in the stove. "Once you get into the hands of those doctors you're lost! They'll doctor you to death! They just love it when a man gets sick!" Andrei regarded the three days he had spent in the medical battalion as a total loss.

During his illness Andrei had changed even more than during the march. His face had become pale and drawn and set, and his eyes had lost their gentle expression and their clear light—evidently forever. Now his glance was brief and hasty and somewhat grim. He spoke in a sharp, at times even cantankerous, voice. In both appearance and character he had suddenly begun to resemble his father.

The wood refused to burn. Throwing down the poker, Andrei muttered, "I'll skip, and that'll be that! Why rot away here?"

A hand pushed aside the door flap. "There he is," a medical orderly said. "Step right in."

Bending his head, Matvei Yurgin entered the tent. He wore a long new greatcoat and a hat of light bluish fur with earlaps. His swarthy cheeks

shone from a recent shave, and he looked younger and more cheerful than during the march.

"Aha, so here's where you are!" he exclaimed as he advanced into the tent. His voice sounded refreshed and more gentle than usual. "And they told me you'd been shipped out."

Andrei jumped up from the log, beside himself with joy.

"Comrade Sergeant!"

In place of the familiar triangles bright red enamel squares shone on the collar of Yurgin's greatcoat.

"Comrade Lieutenant!" Andrei faltered and lowered his voice, as though Yurgin had been not promoted but demoted. But at the same instant he sprang forward even more impetuously. "Comrade Lieutenant, promoted?"

"Turned out that way," Yurgin said in embarrassment, embracing his friend with one arm. "Just yesterday. Major Ozerov comes up to me and says, 'Take over a platoon!' "

"Ours?"

"Yes."

"Comrade Lieutenant!" Andrei burst out, freeing himself from Yurgin's embrace. "I can't stand it! I'm going back to the platoon right now!"

"That's for the doctors to say."

"Doctors!" Andrei blustered. "Those doctors! What do I need them for? All over this place

there's a funny stink. If a man sniffs enough of it he'll really get good and sick. I'll go—and that's all! What do I need those doctors for?"

Yurgin glanced around. "Not so loud."

"There's nobody here. I've been moping here by myself all morning."

The two friends sat down in front of the stove. As though rejoicing at their meeting, the wood suddenly began to crackle gaily and sparks soared up through the cracked stovepipe and out into the freedom of the air.

"You ought to lay in bed some more," Yurgin said, surveying his friend with a sidelong look. "Anybody can see you're weak."

"Don't try to talk me into it, Comrade Lieutenant," Andrei replied. "Don't do me a bad turn. Better tell me about the regiment. What's new? Where is it now? How are the boys? You know, I've been pining away all these days, like I was cut off from my roots. Had all kinds of bad dreams."

Yurgin opened the door of the stove and threw in a chunk of wood.

"Say, Comrade Lieutenant," Andrei said, remembering. "So you didn't go to the doctors at all? It's healed?"

Yurgin smiled. "Like a charm! See?" He moved the fingers of his left hand. "Everything's all right. You sure did save me, Andrei. That weed of yours healed my arm before I knew it. But I went to the

doctors anyhow: they were surprised to see that it had healed over from some kind of weed, but they said it was all right. My fingers still aren't as strong as I'd want them to be, but that doesn't matter."

"And you keep talking about doctors all the time!"

Andrei rose, walked over to the entrance and looked out. A scattering of big star-shaped snowflakes was drifting down; many of them melted before they reached the earth. Under the shelter of a spreading fir not far from the tent an orderly was chopping wood.

"Hey, you, Comrade Orderly!" Andrei called. "Don't know where my things are, do you? The coat and the rest? Bring them over quick: I've got to leave. See you don't hold me up!"

"What can I do with you?" Yurgin said when Andrei returned to the stove. "Well, all right, get your things and we'll go together. . . ."

"It'll take me just a second. They're bringing me my things now."

"So you want to know about the regiment?" Yurgin enthusiastically plunged into an account of the news. "Why, you wouldn't know our regiment now, Andrei! We washed up, got new uniforms, ate and drank—three whole days of it. And enough vodka, too! And now all the boys are full of pep, raring to go, believe you me. There's no holding them! Got new weapons. Lots of machine guns and

tommy guns.... And those bottles.... You know, now they're not the kind we had at the Vazuza, remember? You don't have to light them. All you do is throw them, and they burn by themselves like the devil—nothing can put them out! I've tried them already: just the thing! Well, and we got replacements...."

"Lots?"

"Plenty. Our battalion's been brought up to full strength, and the others got additions too. And there's a new battalion commander."

"Who's that?"

"He's a Buryat, name is Sharakshaneh. He's quick and clever, like a steppe eagle. Looks hot-blooded."

"The men all right?"

"Not all the same. Some are regulars, but most are like you, from the reserves. Now there's all kinds. With us in the infantry it's mostly kolkhoz people and factory workers; but in the artillery and the mortar units there's more of the intelligentsia—you know, teachers, bookkeepers, agronomists.... They say there's even a writer! Well, you know yourself, you got to have educated people there, with all those calculations."

"Where's the regiment now?"

"Yesterday evening the regiment moved up to the sector where the division is. Not far from the front line. I think maybe we'll be moving up to the front line today. It's quite possible."

The ring of an axe came from outside.

"Damn, there's a devil for you!" Andrei sprang up and dashed out of the tent. "What are you still chopping there for?" he shouted at the orderly. "What are you chopping for, you rotten so-and-so! Where are my things? How long have I got to wait? Then go tell the doctor, and hurry up about it! Maybe the boys'll be going into battle today, and you want me to sit here and mope? Hurry up now!"

When he came back he asked Yurgin:

"Who's leading our squad?"

"Sergeant Oleinik. One of the new men."

"All right?"

"Looks sharp and lively but what he'll be like in battle remains to be seen. You only get to know people, Andrei, when you see them in battle."

In an hour, with Yurgin's help, Andrei succeeded in getting a discharge from the medical battalion. He was issued a new uniform, and the chief doctor, with whom he had had to argue his case, suddenly softened and treated him to a glass of vodka in parting.

XIV

The road to the temporary camp of Ozerov's regiment lay across fields sown here and there to winter crops and through small woods thickly strewn with rotting leaves and filled with the blue

haze of autumn. Andrei had been taken to the medical battalion in a covered truck and so he had not seen the frontal zone. When he saw it now he was struck by what had been done there. As he emerged from the wood in which the medical battalion was stationed he stopped in amazement: across the entire field, from north to south, stretched a big bank of clayey earth which looked like the ramparts that used to surround ancient fortresses.

"An anti-tank ditch," Matvei Yurgin explained.

A shaky bridge of boards had been thrown across the ditch; only light ambulances and wagons could cross it, and even then at a risk. Andrei halted on the bridge and cast a glance to the north: he could not see the end of the ditch beyond a rise in the field. He looked south: there the ditch ran right up to a wood. With an abrupt gesture he pushed his hat onto the back of his head.

"Dammit, what a ditch!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Straight as an arrow! And all the earth that had to come up! Comrade Lieutenant, do you really think it can't be crossed?"

"By a tank? Not a chance!"

"Who dug it? Have you heard?"

"Of course I have. Moscow women, brother, all of them," Yurgin replied, his face darkening for some reason. "You just wait—you'll get a lot more big surprises farther on. All autumn long people were working here, Andrei. And you know who?

City-bred women who most likely never held a shovel in all their lives, and young girls who still ought to be running around to the movies. . . . That's who, brother! And just look at what they've done! They say they've dug ditches like that all along the front. And not only ditches. There's all kinds of obstacles all over, besides. Yes, they did a tremendous job here. Now that I've seen it, Andrei, I feel ashamed."

"Ashamed? Why?"

"Ashamed when I think of those Moscow women, so ashamed I don't know where to hide my head," Yurgin replied gloomily. After crossing the bridge he plodded through the slippery mud in silence for a long time. "If we'd stopped the Germans farther back," he finally said, "they never would have had to dig away at the earth here. And I'm ashamed, besides, because they're most likely bearing up under all the hardships of the war better than we are."

After that they walked on in silence. And Andrei indeed had many an occasion to marvel at what the women of Moscow had accomplished in that frontal zone. It was an almost solid zone of defences which the enemy would find hard to negotiate. Deep, winding trenches ran through all the fields, log emplacements with dark firing slits stood on the rises in the terrain, powerful rows of anti-tank obstacles and barbed-wire entanglements were in the

clearings between the woods, and inside the woods were abatis that not even animals could get through....

"If we don't hold our ground here, we really won't be able to look anybody in the eye," Andrei reflected. "No, here the Germans won't get through!" And suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt his heart thrill and ache to be fighting.

XV

Major Ozerov's regiment was camped in a forest not far from the forward lines. Other units had stopped there before on their way to the front: the area was dotted with fresh stumps and strewn with the unused crowns of trees and heaps of damp chips and fir branches; there were many abandoned, water-filled slit trenches, broken-down shelters and horse corrals, and holes filled with ashes and the charred ends of logs.... The stripped, crushed and trampled forest was densely populated by men in grey greatcoats. The camp was full of movement. Here and there in the hastily-built dugouts and shelters of poles and branches lights could be seen.

Yakov Oleinik's squad had taken over a big shelter under two bushy firs. With the exception of Umrikhin the squad was now comprised of replacements. Only three of the new men came from the

regular army. The most conspicuous among them was Terenti Zhigalov, a Komsomol, a thin, sharp-nosed soldier with eyes that were always wide open and on guard, as if expecting a sudden flash of fire. He had retreated from the very border, been wounded, taken prisoner by the Germans, from whom he had miraculously escaped a week later, and had spent about a month in hospital. Every mention of the Germans threw him into a rage: he would spring up and burst into a heated torrent of words, gesticulating violently. The other two from the regular army—Kovalchuk, a Byelorussian, and Medvedyev, a man from the Urals—had had less combat experience; both had been wounded and had been treated in a hospital near Moscow. There they had met Zhigalov, and the three had been sent to the regiment together. All the other men in the squad had been called up from the reserves. Fate had brought them together from many places. Sergeant Oleinik came from the Oka River area—he had been a fur buyer there; Osip Chernyshov was a famous bricklayer from Moscow; Fyodor Kochetkov, a gardener from a sovkhoz not far from Moscow; Tikhon Kudeyarov, a kolkhoz agrotechnician from the district of Vladimir; Petro Semiglaz, brigade leader from a kolkhoz in Kiev Region; Nurgalei Hasanov, an assistant combine operator from Tataria, and Kuzma Yartsev, a cabinetmaker who specialized in bentwood furniture, came from the

same district as the squad leader. Some of them had already seen action but had fallen out of their units for various reasons and then landed in the reserve regiment; others were only recent arrivals at the front and had not yet had a taste of war. The latter, however, had also served in the army before, some for a longer period, others for less, and they knew soldiering.

The squad accorded Andrei a friendly welcome.

"See?" Umrikhin crowed. "So my dream was right!"

The men moved over to make room for Andrei by the fire and proffered their tobacco pouches. While he smoked after his walk they passed on various items of regiment news. Before he even had time to take in the shelter Andrei felt at home among his new comrades in the familiar soldier's environment.

Andrei took an immediate liking to Sergeant Oleinik. The squad leader was a tall, well-built fellow as quick and lithe as a wild cat. His face was almost as swarthy as Yurgin's and he had bright black eyes with a feline slant. He sat down beside Andrei and immediately announced, briefly and precisely:

"Well, you'll be a machine gunner. It's been decided. Know how?"

"The light gun? Yes. I was taught."

"That's that. You'll get a machine gun."

Oleinik tapped the smiling young fellow sitting next to Andrei on the shoulder—he was a stocky Tatar with dark little buttons of eyes—and said, just as briefly:

"Nurgalei, your helper."

"I help," Nurgalei promised cheerfully. "You show me, then I learn. I understand all kinds machines. You just show me."

"I will," Andrei promised.

"Then everything fine."

Petro Semiglaz, a plump, lively man with a girlish complexion, was fussing around the fire. The gayest and most talkative—and, it was evident, inventive and enterprising—he bustled about breaking branches, feeding the fire and poking into the messtins hanging over it. In a little while he spread a tarpaulin out beside the fire and announced:

"Supper, boys!"

"Isn't it kind of early?" Andrei asked.

"Just a snack until the kitchen comes up. Sit down, boys."

"He keeps feeding us all the time," Umrikhin explained. "Yes, he's an expert at that. With a man like him you wouldn't go hungry even in a desert. Today he disappeared for a while in the morning and then we see him come back lugging a sack of potatoes that almost broke his back. The devil only knows where he got them!"

"What do you mean 'where he got them'? In a field. People left them there."

Petro Semiglaz began to dish out the potatoes in exactly equal portions, the way soldiers always do, placing two at a time in front of each man. Nurgalei glanced into a messtin and exclaimed in disappointment in his broken Russian:

"Ah, Petro, you should put chickie in here!"

Semiglaz did not understand. "What?"

"Chickie," Nurgalei repeated quickly.

"Bah! What's he talking about? Can't make out a word!"

"He doesn't understand!" Nurgalei even felt hurt. "You know, hen baby, understand? Little chickie."

The men roared, holding their sides.

"Oh, that's enough! My stomach aches from laughing!"

"A baby, eh? Boy or girl?"

Nurgalei saw that his comrades were laughing good-naturedly and did not take offence. But his face broke into a gleaming sweat. When the laughter had died down and the men had started on the potatoes, he spit something out onto his palm and poked Semiglaz in the ribs.

"You devil! Look what you give!"

"What's it now?"

"Why potatoes grow with iron inside?"

Semiglaz gasped. "Why, it's shrapnel! From a mine. While I dug, those Fritzes shelled me!"

"Heavy fire?" Oleinik asked.

"Uh-huh. I'm digging, and they pop to the right and left of me."

"They all explode?"

"Of course."

"Go on, they don't all explode."

"Well, maybe some didn't," Semiglaz readily agreed. "I won't argue, it happens."

"That's just the point," Oleinik concluded gloomily. "Maybe in your hurry, you devil you, you put a mine that didn't explode together with the potatoes and boiled it. Let's have a look at the messtins!"

Again the men rocked with laughter. Nurgalei hugged his stomach and began to roll over the branches by the fire.

"Oi, I swallowed mine!" he cried. "There it is! Now it explodes! Step away, please!"

Nurgalei gave such a convincing portrayal of a man waiting in horror for a mine to explode in his stomach that all the others, joining in the spirit of the thing, scattered to the corners of the shelter, hid their heads and laughed for a long time....

"See what kind of a helper you've landed?" Umrikhin said to Andrei when they had all laughed themselves out and gathered in the centre of the shelter again. "A regular actor!"

"He's all right," Andrei agreed. "They're all good. A lively bunch. That kind will fight. But what about that one. He sick?"

In a corner of the shelter sat Kuzma Yartsev, a thin, bony man with sallow cheeks and tired, sunken eyes. He was the only member of the squad who had not laughed. He had been silent all the time. He sat gazing moodily into the fire, his dark, stubbly chin on his knees. Every now and then his body gave a twitch, as though he were asleep.

"He's kind of queer," Umrikhin whispered in reply. "You'll see for yourself in a minute."

Sergeant Oleinik was summoned by the platoon officer. The men finished the potatoes and, chatting, pulled out their tobacco pouches. Just then Ivan Umrikhin unobtrusively nudged Andrei with his elbow and shouted in his hoarse voice:

"Planes!"

Everybody immediately stopped talking to listen for the drone of motors, but Kuzma Yartsev leaped up from his place and dashed out to dive into a slit.

"I hope you go crazy!" Petro Semiglaz yelled at Umrikhin, his nostrils quivering. "I hope you go deaf forever, you madman!"

"But I warned you," Umrikhin put in.

Again the shelter shook with laughter.

Kuzma Yartsev came back and took his place without a glance at his comrades. Petro Semiglaz fol-

lowed him with his eyes. "They frightened the soldier boy again!" he remarked.

"Up to your tricks again, Ivan?" Andrei snapped out all of a sudden. Everybody fell silent. "Again? Maybe he's really scared, and you—You look out, Ivan, or I'll have a little talk with you that'll make you stutter!"

Umrikhin's feelings were not hurt—he was merely surprised. He looked at Andrei in admiration, lifting his beak of a nose. "Oho! Look at that, will you? Say, Andrei, you've turned out even more serious than the late Semyon, eh? Well, thank God! That suits me very fine indeed!"

"I'll suit you, all right!"

Oleinik appeared in the entrance.

"Put out the fires! Form ranks!"

...At dark Ozerov's regiment set out for the forward lines. It had been assigned to a sector on the right flank of the division, not far from a highway leading to Moscow. Several small units had been holding down that sector for more than a week and were in need of a rest. But before the regiment could take over, it had to deepen the trenches, build additional dugouts and log emplacements, and set up command and observation posts. This work it had to complete in two nights, and then it would take up the positions and bar the enemy's way to Moscow.

XVI

The regiment returned to camp just before dawn. During the night it had greatly improved the defences. The night had passed quietly, with the exception of several shells a German battery sent over, probably by accident, a few minutes before the regiment drew back for a rest. One soldier was killed and three slightly wounded. But everybody in the regiment felt that things had gone well.

In the morning Andrei received a machine gun. There was something wrong with it, however, and he had to carry it to the repair shop, which was in a lonely forester's cabin about three kilometres away.

On the way back he took a short-cut. When he had covered about half the distance along that path, he stopped for a smoke near a swampy little stream overgrown with bushes. All of a sudden he noticed a man among the bushes at the bottom of the steep bank. He shook his rifle loose from his shoulder, squatted behind a fir and listened.

"Hey, who's there?" he called out softly after a few seconds.

The willow and black-currant bushes at the edge of the stream shook and there was a squelching sound in the slimy mud. Andrei had not intended to shout, but he suddenly did.

"Halt!"

A pair of hands black with swamp mud reared up over the bushes and a man cried out in a wild, frightened voice:

"I'm a friend! Wait, I'm a friend!"

Andrei jumped down the bank.

The person by the stream turned out to be an enlisted man. In the shadowy light of the forest his sickly face was waxen. He was a very much frightened man. Moaning, he crawled forward on his knees, now throwing up his dirty hands, now clasping them to his breast.

"Don't shoot! I'm a friend!"

"Yartsev?" Andrei exclaimed in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't ask."

"But just the same."

"I lost my way, that's what," Yartsev replied, slumping down beside a currant bush.

Lean and bony, he sat hunched over, trying to clasp his knees in his arms—but his arms shook and would not obey him. Feeling that Andrei was waiting for a more detailed reply, he went on:

"It turned out a mess. I went to the medical company with a man from our battalion. You see, I'm just wasting away, and I don't know what from. Well, they kept him there but me they sent back. Gave me these pills. I'm on my way back, and all of a sudden the sky's full of planes! I ran

off the road and hid, and then I got lost—don't know which way to go. All mixed up! So I've been roaming around, and I can't figure out which way to go."

Andrei stood facing Yartsev, examining him with a fixed suspicious stare. He could not understand why Yartsev's hands should be trembling so.

"Why did you get scared?"

"Me? Scared?" He was playing for time. "Well, you see, I don't know the place—there's all kinds of people about. . . ."

He did not know where to hide his trembling hands. His terror was so evident that Andrei gave a shudder. He could not put his finger on anything, but he felt there was something queer in Yartsev's sitting beside that stream. This spot in the forest which Yartsev had for some reason chosen was now filled with mystery; it was a place where, Andrei felt, only the evil or the supernatural could happen. He felt that he could not leave Yartsev here another second, and remaining here with him was both terrifying and repulsive.

"Come on!" he ordered. "Kuzma, let's go! Do you hear?"

Yartsev's pale face became distorted, as though with pain.

"Go?" he asked in a whisper. "Back to the company?"

"Where else?"

Yartsev began to tremble from head to foot. Even by the pale light in the forest Andrei could see his eyes glaze over. Yartsev heaved a despairing sigh, as though bidding farewell to the world, then suddenly rolled over on his side and began to snatch at the bottom branches of the currant bush and pull them to his chest.

"Kuzma! What's the matter?"

"I can't stand it," Yartsev whispered weakly.

"What's on your mind? Well?"

These words brought Yartsev to his senses. He rose quickly.

"Why?" he asked, trying to get a grip on himself. "Just a second—I'm coming."

All the way back Andrei was silent, but Yartsev, walking beside him, for some reason talked continuously about his family. He broke down as he recalled his ailing wife and his children. Andrei was astonished at the many shining, affectionate words he carried in his heart....

XVII

When he heard the drone of motors Kuzma Yartsev dived into his slit as usual. The planes passed over, flying east, but even then he lay listening for a long time, cautiously glancing up into the sky. On his way past, Sergeant Oleinik stopped beside the slit.

"Yartsev!" he called out sternly.

"Here, Comrade Sergeant!"

"Come with me—to the company commander!"

With a quick motion Kuzma Yartsev raised the rim of his helmet from his eyes. A cold pallor suffused his thin cheeks. He stood motionless for a few seconds, unable to hear anything for the rumble in his chest and the ringing in his head. Looking down at him angrily, Oleinik beckoned with his finger. Yartsev leaned against the edge of the slit and began to clutch at the grass to pull himself out, but there was no strength in his hands.

Oleinik bent over him. "Give me your hand! Some soldier you are!" Yartsev's body had become so heavy for some reason that Oleinik had difficulty in pulling him out of the slit.

Sergeant Oleinik strode into the heart of the forest without glancing back. Well-built and agile, he moved with a springy, animal-like tread, every once in a while adjusting the tommy gun slung over his shoulder. Yartsev had a hard time keeping up with him: his chest felt so choked there seemed little room left for his heart. Seizing hold of a bush, he halted and cried weakly:

"Wait!"

Oleinik glanced over his shoulder.

"Come on!"

"Tell me: is it true?"

"Come on!"

After that Yartsev had no recollection of where Oleinik led him. When he came to himself he saw that he was sitting on the ground in a dense thicket. Opposite him, on a rotting log, sat the sergeant; his black eyes, shaped like a cat's, glittered behind a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Where are we?" Yartsev whispered breathlessly.

"Wipe your face. Scratched yourself all up in the bushes. No, you haven't got any guts. You're a weakling. I didn't know it. If I did, I wouldn't have tied up with such a rabbit-hearted creature. Wipe it off some more there!"

"You've done me in," Yartsev whispered.

"Should have. What's a creature like you got to live for?"

They were silent for a minute. Oleinik listened intently, his slanting eyes glancing about. From the distance came the crash of gunfire. Somewhere far from the thicket soldiers were talking. But in their immediate vicinity there was only the heavy silence of the forest. Dropping his voice Oleinik finally asked:

"Well, comrade deserter, so you got caught, eh?"

Yartsev let his breath out in a deep sigh. "No luck."

"How did he find you?"

Kuzma Yartsev described how he had made his way into the depths of the forest from the medical company, intending to wait there until dark and then leave the frontal area, and how Andrei Lopukhov had come upon him by accident.

"No luck, brother!"

Oleinik rose and, narrowing his eyes, stared fixedly at Yartsev.

"Get up!"

"You ... you ... what do you want?" Yartsev could barely get to his feet.

Sergeant Oleinik shifted his shoulders slightly and, without moving from the spot, gave Yartsev a terrific punch in the jaw. With a groan Yartsev fell on his back beside a buckthorn bush, but then quickly rose to his knees. Leaning on the palms of his hands, he said softly, "Don't hit me!" and burst into tears.

"You bastard!" Oleinik said, also softly. He sat down on the rotting log again. "Wipe that mug of yours some more!"

He flicked aside the stub of his cigarette and rolled himself another.

"Will he give you away?"

"Don't think so," Yartsev answered.

"Don't think so? Then why did you get so scared when I ordered you to go to the company commander?"

"It's my heart. You know the kind of heart I

have." Yartsev screwed up his face. "But he shouldn't give me away. Maybe he suspects something, but he can't prove it. Why couldn't I lose my way? I don't know the place. . . ."

Oleinik, however, did not seem to put much faith in Yartsev's assurances.

"You're a fool!" he said presently. "So you ran away! I told you so. He wasn't looking for you, and even so he found you! And suppose they'd searched for you? Where'd you have gone? Where'd you have hidden? Suppose you even got back to the rear. Would it be for long? Every woman would fly at your throat. Or don't you know how they look on men like that back there?"

"I have someone else's papers."

"So much the worse!"

"I'd live in the forest meanwhile."

Oleinik drew his lips back over his gums. "And then?"

"And then maybe the war would end. . . . You said yourself that maybe it'll end soon."

Oleinik was still unable to calm down; he kept working his thin lips and throwing angry glances at Yartsev.

"Yes, I did!" he admitted in a furious whisper. "And more than once. It has to end soon. Look at those Germans—right on top of Moscow! Who's going to turn them back?"

"That's just what I'm saying—"

"What he's saying!" Again Oleinik bared his teeth viciously. "The war'll end soon, but the question is will you live to see it? I tell you again: in the rear every single woman'll take you by the scruff of the neck just like a puppy! Can't you get that into your head?"

"But I'll get killed here anyway!"

"Here?" Oleinik was so worked up that beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. "That's right! It'll be even worse here! In the rear maybe you'll last a week, or even two, but here—if there's a battle tomorrow it'll be curtains for you! A bullet is bad enough, but suppose you get your insides splashed all over a tree! The infantry!" He spat in disgust through his big yellow teeth. "There's no salvation in the rear, and here there's even less of it!"

Kuzma Yartsev sat with his bony shoulders hunched up high. His unsuccessful attempt to run away had so discouraged him that now he had no strength left at all. At the thought that he would soon have to go into battle his chest contracted until he could hardly breathe. How he yearned at that moment for at least a single friendly word! But Oleinik kept boring and boring away at him; his venom and conviction that they were doomed struck terror into Yartsev's heart.

"Stop, Yakov, stop," Yartsev begged, pale and shaky.

Oleinik raised his voice slightly. "And we can save ourselves! We can!"

"Again the same thing," Yartsev said plaintively.

"Of course the same thing!"

Oleinik rose. He stood for a moment, listening, and cast his eyes warily, like a cat, about the thicket. No one disturbed the silence. He sat down again in the same place, drew a pink sheet from inside his shirt and handed it to Yartsev.

"Read that! The latest."

The leaflet shook in Yartsev's hands.

"See what it says? And there's even a picture of...." Oleinik dropped his voice to a whisper. "That's our only way out—to cross over. If we do we remain alive!"

Yartsev closed his eyes and shook his head.

"I can't. My wife, you know yourself, she's a very sick woman, and there's a houseful of kids. If I go what'll happen to them?"

Oleinik took back the leaflet, crumpled it in his fist, pushed it under the log and let loose a string of swearwords.

"You're not a man but a damn jellyfish! Even looking at you turns my stomach. If you're going to get away you've got to use your head and not do what you did today. You have to be reported missing! Missing—and that's the end of it! All right, so your woman'll shed a few tears."

Even before reaching the front they had more than once discussed running away, but Yartsev had always refused. This time, too, he refused flatly.

"Don't try to talk me into it, Yakov! I'm not going any farther away from home. I won't gain a thing by crossing over. Besides, the Germans are no friends of mine."

"They're no friends of mine either," Oleinik rejoined. "The only thing is, we all dry our boots in the same sun. I know they aren't going to meet us with open arms, and I don't expect it."

"What do you mean, open arms? They'll string us up yet! That's what those who got out of there say. They burn people alive and hang them!"

"Nonsense! We know—that's all propaganda. Who says that? Just the Communists! You can be sure they won't string everybody up!" Oleinik dropped his head and glanced sidewise at the bony figure of Yartsev, who was brooding dejectedly. Then he continued, now choosing his words slowly: "Of course there's nothing for Communists to do over there. But what about you? They'll make you sweat, that's true. You can't get away from that. But if you last out to the end of the war everything'll be fine. Those Germans won't be here forever." He gave a start and again looked fixedly at Yartsev, bringing

the pupils of his eyes slightly together. "What—did the Bolsheviks pat you on the head? How long did you sit in jail for their good health? A year, wasn't it?"

"Almost a year," Yartsev replied in a toneless voice.

"Well, I didn't, but I should have," Oleinik said, controlling his agitation. "It looked certain. They jailed my father.... When I think of my father I boil all over inside! I'll never forget that!"

There was a swish in the branches nearby, and a second later the top of the young fir that grew beside the log shook. Yartsev flung himself down sideways and spread out his gnarled fingers over the ground. But Oleinik did not even flicker. He spat derisively through his yellowed teeth.

"Dead? Or not yet?"

"Who's that?" Yartsev whispered.

"Yes, no guts, no guts!"

Yartsev raised himself slightly. "Who was that?"

"A squirrel, you fool!" And when Yartsev had again seated himself on his skinny behind, like an old hound, Oleinik said firmly, "Well? Let's have your final word."

"No, Yakov. I'm not going."

"Going to try to desert again?"

"No, I won't."

"Oho! So you're going to fight?"

"No, not that either. How can I?"

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I'll think it over."

There was silence. Then Oleinik brought the conversation to a close:

"Well, think it over. As for me, there's no reason why I should get killed at my age. If you don't want to go along, then goodbye. As soon as there's a chance I'll cross over. Don't be sore because I smacked you in the teeth. You needed it. Maybe it'll do you good. That's all!" Then he added threateningly, "See you don't get any crazy ideas about telling on me! Or you'll get a bullet through you fast enough! Just remember."

With that he rose from the log.

XVIII

At staff headquarters of the army, to which he and his men had been sent, Ober-Lieutenant Rudolf Mitmann supplied important information about the preparations of the Germans for new attacks. His statements were confirmed: German troop movements and the transfer of tanks and artillery to the forward positions were spotted on several sectors, including the one opposite General Borodin's divi-

sion. In connection with this, Major Ozerov unexpectedly received a new order: with the advent of darkness to send two battalions up to the front lines not only for fortification work but simultaneously to take up permanent defence positions. One battalion was to remain behind meanwhile as a reserve. In addition they had to keep the enemy under constant observation and capture a prisoner that very night to ascertain the exact time the Germans planned to mount their new attack on the division's sector.

Major Ozerov immediately summoned Yurgin.

"Look here, Siberian, old man," he said worriedly as he continued to make marks on the map. "We need a 'tongue.'"

As always Yurgin looked at the regiment commander with self-assurance, and he answered unhurriedly:

"We'll get one, Comrade Major. I'll go myself."

"'Myself!'" Ozerov lifted his eyes from the map. "Don't you think I could get a 'tongue' myself? You won't be much of a commander if you do everything yourself. You've got to have confidence not only in yourself but in the men too. Arrange it. Pick dependable men, tell them what to do and how to do it—and then let them go ahead. I'll give them detailed instructions myself just before they set out."

"Yes, Comrade Major! May I go?"

"Wait. . . ." Ozerov picked through the contents of his map case and drew out a little booklet. "Here's something about scouting. It's very useful. Read it through and then act. We all have to study, old man."

. . . In Oleinik's squad the issue of makhorka was being divided up. Petro Semiglaz had volunteered for the job. He had spread out the makhorka on a cape-tent and was running his fingers through it. His nostrils twitched eagerly.

"Anybody got a measure?"

A measure could not be found. Then Umrikhin quickly stepped up to the heap of makhorka.

"Stop!" he said, flinging aside Petro's hand. "If there's no measure then we don't trust you. I can see for myself. Look at how your nose's working! Anything else, but on makhorka you'll cheat us, that I can see!"

Petro was hurt. "Me? Cheat?"

"That's right, you!"

"He's crazy, honest to God, he's crazy!"

For some reason the fact that Petro Semiglaz' honesty had been questioned tickled everybody, and to see what would happen they sided with Umrikhin.

"Let someone else!"

"Move over, Petro!"

"You just wait!" Semiglaz threatened.

Umrikhin continued to play the boss.

"Who's going to divide it? It's a serious business."

Nurgalei Hasanov, his eyes flashing, quickly suggested:

"Let Andrei, huh?"

"Yes, he's dependable," Umrikhin put in.

They all agreed eagerly.

"Divide it, Andrei!"

"And hurry up, I want to smoke!"

Andrei divided the makhorka into equal piles. one for each man in the squad. Petro Semiglaz immediately stretched out his hand toward one of them.

Andrei stopped him. "Wait a minute."

"Going to do a little hocus-pocus?"

"Turn around," Andrei said to Nurgalei. When Nurgalei had turned around Andrei put his hand over one of the piles and said, "Who gets this?"

Nurgalei was a great admirer of this soldier's method of fair division.

"Petro Five-Eyes,"* he answered smartly. Then he caught himself and exclaimed, "Oi, no, I made mistake! Six-Eyes! Oi, no! Wait just minute, I got to count his name!"

The squad roared with laughter.

* Literally the name Semiglaz means Seven-Eyes.—*Trans.*

"That devil!" Petro burst out good-naturedly. "And he laughs yet!"

A minute later all of them were puffing away.

Lieutenant Yurgin appeared in the entrance of the shelter. Oleinik sprang nimbly to his feet and commanded:

" 'Ten-shun!"

Yurgin waved his hand. "Keep seated, keep seated." Without stepping in he asked: "Any of you men like to do some scouting?"

"Scouting?" Oleinik stepped forward and answered eagerly, "I do, Comrade Lieutenant! I want to go scouting very much. I've wanted to a long time."

"All right, I'll call for you. . . ."

Andrei came forward from a corner of the shelter.

"I'll go too," he said simply.

The third man to express a desire to participate in the night sally was Terenti Zhigalov.

"I served in the scouts three years!" he said excitedly. "At the front I was in the scouts too! I've got to go! I know those Germans, those. . . ." He became incoherent. "O-o-o, like this!" And he suddenly struck the shelter pole so hard that dry fir needles showered down into the fireplace.

Yurgin was pleased; he liked all the volunteers. "Excellent," he said. "I was looking for

men just like you. That's enough. The less men on a night sally the better. You got to work silently. So get ready and come along with me now."

The remaining hours until evening Oleinik, Andrei and Zhigalov spent at the observation post. They carefully studied the terrain, selecting their route to the German positions.

Major Ozerov gave them the necessary instructions and after midnight the scouts crossed the trench and cautiously made their way toward the west in single file along a narrow hollow. All was quiet at the front. A fog lay on the ground. The moon peeped out at rare intervals, and then sleepily and unwillingly, spreading a sickly, cheerless light over the sky.

As everywhere else, on this sector the Germans did not have a compact line. Preparing to take up the offensive again, they had their units stationed in the villages and woods, with only small posts at the forward lines. One such post had been spotted during the day on a low hill sparsely covered with bushes. The scouts headed for the hill.

They never reached it, however.

Halfway there Terenti Zhigalov, who since he was an experienced scout was in front, halted in a clump of bushes. He wanted to listen to the night sounds and discuss what to do next with

his comrades. To hurry Oleinik and Andrei along, he gave an impatient squeak in imitation of an injured animal. Just then a report sounded to the left of them and something hissed like an angry snake. With a shower of sparks a rocket shot up over the bushes. Such a bright light flooded the earth that the scouts froze in their tracks. A second later German tommy guns began to cross-stitch the air.

Blinded by the glare of the rocket, Andrei threw himself to the ground. He rolled into a hole —and his heart missed a beat. It turned out to be a bomb crater. Sergeant Oleinik, the last in line, wedged himself into some bushes. "They'll kill me," he thought, "and that'll be the end!" Both Andrei and Oleinik realized they had run into a group of Germans, probably also out on a night sally.

Terenti Zhigalov remained in front.

He saw that the job had fallen through and decided to crawl back unobserved to where his comrades were, without opening fire. Quickly, like a lizard, he crept through the damp, rotting grass. The rattle of the tommy guns died away. He was just about to get to his feet when two husky Germans pounced on him out of the bushes. For several seconds he struggled silently to throw them off; only when they twisted his arms back until they snapped and lifted him off the earth, and he

glimpsed a faint sliver of the moon dropping from the sky, did he cry out:

"A-a-a-a! Here!"

His hoarse, agonized cry carried far in the night. Andrei jumped out of the crater. He guessed at once what had happened. He heard the thud of blows, a heavy groan, and then, farther away, a wild shrieking voice, not at all like the voice of Terenti Zhigalov:

"... r-ro ... thers, shoot! Don't be afraid! Shoot!"

Andrei understood that Zhigalov wanted him to shoot. But how could he?—he might kill Zhigalov along with the Germans. Sweat streamed down his face. There was silence for a few seconds, and then from ahead came Zhigalov's broken, heart-rending cries. He caught only fragments of words, wheezes and groans. But suddenly, from far off, one word rang out clearly, the way it does in war:

"Fire!"

There was so much soul-searing force in that word that Andrei knew he must fire. It was an order to be fulfilled unconditionally. With a moan he unshouldered his tommy gun and pressed the trigger. The tommy gun kicked back at his shoulder as though it wanted to leap out of his hands. Ahead in the darkness bushes rustled and howls rang out....

He pressed the trigger several times and, in a daze, fired until the tommy gun ceased to kick. When the gun fell silent he bent over and started to dig the empty drum out, shaken to his depths by the realization of what he had just done. Everything had grown quiet in the direction he had been firing. But at many German advance posts heavy machine guns went into action; tracer bullets streamed across the field like swarms of bees.

The drum had got stuck, and before Andrei could remove it a panting human figure sprang at him from the side. Andrei had just time to turn and catch him across the legs with his tommy gun.

Then he threw himself on the figure with the entire weight of his big, heavy body.

They grappled in the thick wet grass, grunting. Andrei found his hand on the face of his enemy, and with a strength trebled by fury he tore at the man's nose, his eyes, his lips.... Then, remembering he had a knife, he began to fumble hastily for it at his belt but felt himself falling back from a strong blow in the chest. He saved himself by a miracle: he managed to fasten his fingers into his enemy's coat and they rolled together head over heels to the bottom of the crater. Only here did Andrei manage to press the German down with his chest, and he drew out his knife. He did not know where the blow landed, but there was a distinct crunch.

He pulled the knife out and flung it aside with a shiver of disgust, forgetting in his haste that he might still need it. The German began to twist and throw out his arms energetically. Andrei saw that he had not killed him. Knowing that he was unarmed, he became frightened and again threw himself on the German, panting, and pressed him to the ground. It was now that he uttered his first cry:

"Sergeant, help!"

Oleinik's voice came from the edge of the crater:

"Where are you? Where are you?"

"Down here!"

Oleinik sprang down right on top of Andrei.

"What's the matter with you?" Andrei asked, pushing him aside with his shoulder.

"Damn it!" Oleinik muttered. "It's so dark!"

"Help!" Andrei breathed once more.

The German twisted again and emitted a wheezing sound in an attempt to cry out. Andrei hit him in the face, covered his mouth and then hastily gagged him with a piece of cloth he had brought along for that purpose.

"Where the devil'd he come from?" he whispered, relieved now that the German was weak and had quietened down. "Here, I'll drag him and you follow. Only we'll have to hurry!"

The German machine guns were still chattering; red tracer bullets streaked over their heads.

"How'll we get through? They're firing all around," Oleinik said anxiously.

"I'll get him through! Along the hollow!"

He took the German by the arms and jerked him off the ground and onto his back with a single motion. Then he settled him on his back, the way he did with heavy loads, and crawled cautiously out of the hole.

"Come on! If anything happens cover me with your fire!"

In the German advance posts machine guns chattered away nervously; signal rockets trembled in the sky and scattered blossoms of light. Streams of bullets swept the field. Bent over, Andrei walked along with big strides, not glancing back. The German's feet dragged on the ground.

Oleinik walked behind. All the way out he had been thinking about desertion. He had been thinking about desertion until the moment the Germans seized Terenti Zhigalov. Then he had been so astounded by Zhigalov's plea and Andrei's firing that somehow he had forgotten all about it. Only now, after he had taken a hundred paces behind Andrei, did he remember. "Where the devil can I go now?" he thought, shrinking as the bullets whistled close by. "Just stick your nose out of this hollow and it's curtains! And I can't hang back now. If they catch me I'm done for. They'll see right away I was out scouting...." So he fol-

lowed Lopukhov and watched carefully to be sure he did not lose him in the foggy hollow.

A hundred metres from the trench he caught up with Andrei. "Heavy?" he asked, falling into step with him.

"Yes, damn him! I'm even sweating." Andrei stopped. "He stinks too—smells like a dog."

"Better take a rest," Oleinik suggested. "Let me carry him a little. Is he alive, though?"

"Yes, he's still alive. But he must have lost a lot of blood."

"All right, let me have him."

As he lowered the German to the ground Andrei said bitterly:

"What do you think of Terenti, eh? As long as I live I'll never forget him!"

"Yes, he got it."

"And the way it happened!"

Oleinik lugged the German to the shelter from which they had started out on the sally. The men had been waiting for them anxiously: they all realized something had gone wrong. The moment Oleinik laid the German on the ground voices rose on all sides and flashlights began to flicker. The first to come up was Lieutenant Yurgin.

"Oleinik? Is that you? And the others?"

As he neared the shelter Andrei heard someone in the trench say enthusiastically:

"Hey, fellows, that Sergeant Oleinik's some guy,

isn't he? Look at what he's just done! He's brought in a 'tongue.' Go take a look. Over there, near the shelter."

Yurgin reported the results of the sally to Ozerov by telephone. The latter ordered Yurgin, Lopukhov and Oleinik to come to the regiment command post at once with the German.

The German prisoner turned out to be a senior corporal. He died just before sunrise, but he managed to say that the Germans would strike at the sector held by the division on the morning of November seventh....

XIX

Captain Sharakshaneh's battalion was in the reserve.

That evening it was to move up to the advance positions.

At sunrise, when Oleinik and Andrei were still at the regiment command post, Kuzma Yartsev, one of the last to wake up, crawled out to the fire, trembling violently. He stretched out his hands over the flames.

"Where'd you get such a trembling fit?" Petro Semiglaz asked in wonder.

"I'm fro-ozen," Yartsev answered.

"I'd say it's not so much your belly but your heart that's shaking."

"Can't your heart freeze?"

"Depends on the heart!"

The kitchen came up. They all went over to it with their messtins. On the way back to the shelter Umrikhin turned his messtin in his hands and remarked despondently:

"The cook's kind of stingy today."

"What's the matter, not enough?" Petro Semiglaz queried.

"Just take a look. Call that a portion?"

"Army rations—what do you expect?" Semiglaz said. "You won't die of starvation, but you won't chase after women either."

"Here's what happened once," Umrikhin said, still not touching his porridge. "A general was passing through, and he comes up to the kitchen, you know, all in red with gold braid. That was at the Velikaya River, when we were stationed there.... Well, he asks the men, 'How about it, comrade fighters, get enough to eat?' Of course we all answer in chorus the way we're supposed to, 'En-ough, Comrade General, there's even some left over!' 'Left over?' says the general. 'And what do you do with the left-overs?' 'Eat 'em up, Comrade General, and there's not even enough of them!' "

As soon as Umrikhin had put away his portion of porridge, before all the rest, Petro Semiglaz placed a second messtin in front of him. Anxious to placate Umrikhin so that he would trust him to

divide the makhorka, Petro winked at him as one conspirator to another.

"Eat it up," he said. "I got it for you."

Umrikhin looked at the messtin. "Whose is it?"

"Why—Terenti Zhigalov's. The cook doesn't know about him yet, so I took it—"

"You fool! Take it back!"

Medvedyev and Kovalchuk, who were the saddest of all that morning, told how they had got acquainted with Terenti Zhigalov in the hospital near Moscow. He had gone through hell while a prisoner of the Germans and he was a sick man, yet he had always been straining to get back to the front and fight the enemy.

"He went back to the lines without even finishing his cure," Kovalchuk said. "You saw those fits he had, didn't you?"

"A fiery lad," Medvedyev said. "And what a way to die, just imagine! If he'd only lived long enough he'd have been a Hero of the whole Soviet Union, I'll stake my head on that! Why, every fibre of him was dying to go into battle!"

"Yes, he was a Party man too," Umrikhin sighed. "Like our late Semyon Degtyarev. They were both the same kind."

"He wasn't in the Party yet," Kovalchuk remarked. "He was only in the Komsomol. . . ."

"Doesn't matter. He was a Party man by na-

ture," Umrikhin insisted. "You could see it. Yes, the more I look around the more I see it's Party men like that who get killed first. There was our commissar, Comrade Yakhno—he got killed, too. And what a man he was! All quicksilver! Yes, with people like that it's probably true that every fibre is just straining to go into battle. . . ."

Kuzma Yartsev stared long at Zhigalov's messtin and pondered on his sudden and tragic death. Then he set aside his own messtin and, forgetting to take his spoon with him, unobtrusively slipped out of the shelter.

A German mortar battery was pounding away at the forward positions. A biting north wind rustled the trees. Even in the forest it was cold. All the men had taken to the dugouts and shelters, from which threads of smoke curled up through the thick branches of the firs.

That morning found Kuzma Yartsev especially upset. And not only by Zhigalov's death. He had been certain that Oleinik would go over to the Germans from the scouting sally. When he learned that Oleinik had returned he grew frightened, he himself did not know why. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that Oleinik's changing his mind for some reason or other did not concern him, his anxiety did not diminish. His troubled heart told him that Oleinik's return not only broke their agreement but boded some kind of evil.

He recalled all his meetings and conversations with Oleinik. They both came from the same Oka River locality. Kuzma Yartsev, who had not wished to join the kolkhoz, worked in a manufacturing artel, while Oleinik was a traveling fur buyer. They used to meet only rarely and had not known each other well. In the army, however, they had become friends, the way men from the same place do when far from home. Knowing that Yartsev had a grudge against the Soviet government (just before the war he had served about a year in prison for speculation) and that he lived in overwhelming fear of death, Oleinik cautiously and unhurriedly began to persuade him to desert. Lonely and terrified, Kuzma Yartsev had become close friends with Oleinik. His talks with Oleinik were his only consolation and kept alive his spark of faith in somehow escaping from the war and death.

However, Kuzma Yartsev was afraid to go over to the Germans, and when he heard the stories the men in Ozerov's regiment told about them he firmly rejected Oleinik's proposal. To desert and live out the war in the rear was no easy matter either, and, most important, was also dangerous. What was there left to do? How could he save himself from certain death?

Kuzma Yartsev wandered off, his mind disordered by his worries, and about two hundred metres

from the camp came out into a large clearing. At the eastern end of the clearing there was a sharp rise topped by a clump of bushy young pines. He headed for this place to sit down and calmly think out what to do, how to keep from getting killed. At the foot of the rise gaped a big fresh bomb crater. He stopped beside it. "They'll throw me into a hole like this," he thought, "and it'll be the end of everything." He closed his eyes, and before him spread the battlefield he had often seen in his dreams; he saw the survivors dragging his bloody corpse to just such a bomb crater—and he was left utterly powerless to combat his terror.

He remembered nothing clearly after that. In a daze, he sat on the little hill a long time, crying without restraint. Then he was in the shelter, and then he was wandering about somewhere, vainly seeking peace of mind and a way out.

Around noon some men found him in a clump of low bushes not far from the battalion's camp. He was thrashing about on the ground and moaning.

His left wrist had been smashed by a bullet. On the ground nearby lay a rifle.

A crow flew over the clearing, tiredly flapping its wings. At sight of the bird Kuzma Yartsev real-

ized that evening was approaching. A magnificent blood-red sun hung low over the forest in the frosty haze of the air; it hung there in indecision, as though it had lost its familiar landmarks.

Far ahead of him Kuzma Yartsev saw two rows of soldiers. Above their heads glittered bayonets. He could not distinguish the faces of the soldiers. A split second later the rows were suddenly very near, but even then he noted with surprise that they all looked like—counterparts, with identical faces and eyes. "What company is that?" flashed through his mind. "Ours? What's it doing here?" Looking about, he saw that he was standing at the foot of the same rise he had come to in the morning. And then everything that had happened that day came back to him.

In the afternoon there had been a court-martial. Yartsev had said nothing in his own defence. Nor could he have: crazed as he had been by fear it had not entered his mind that his crime would be laid bare without any difficulty. Realizing that to attempt to justify himself would be useless, he pleaded guilty at once. As he began to tell the court how he had committed his crime, he suddenly felt a great load drop from his shoulders, and he strove to recall all his actions and thoughts of that morning. But the judge brusquely cut him short, saying this had no bearing on the case. Aft-

er that Yartsev saw clearly that he would be shot, and probably very soon. He would not even live until evening. Death was absolutely inevitable, and very close. As he stood before the court-martial Yartsev realized that death was now closer than it ever could have been in battle. Before, giving in to his fear, he had been convinced that as soon as he went into battle he would be killed. But here suddenly came the very simple thought that if he went into battle now, it was by no means certain that he would be killed. Nobody could say that exactly. After all, men fought for years, fought in numerous battles, and came through unscathed. But now he and the judges and all the soldiers crowding around knew for a certainty that he would not even live until evening....

When he saw himself standing beside the fresh crater and when he realized that he had been led out for execution, Kuzma Yartsev suddenly felt that he had more strength and vitality than in many days past. One of the members of the tribunal stepped before the rows of soldiers and read out the verdict of the court-martial. Battalion Commander Captain Sharakshaneh, a tall, quick-moving Buryat, began to speak to the soldiers. Kuzma Yartsev caught only his question:

"Who wishes to shoot the traitor to his country? Any volunteers? Take two steps forward!"

Andrei stood in the centre of the first row. His

entire day had passed in a dream. Terenti Zhigalov's act had shaken him up and forced him to reconsider his point of view on many things. It made Kuzma Yartsev's crime—the gravest a soldier could commit in wartime—all the more despicable in his eyes. But this was not all that agitated Andrei. Inwardly he felt that a share of the guilt lay with him as well: when he met Yartsev in the forest he had suspected that fear was beginning to lead the man to treason, but he had refrained from telling his commanders about it—he had taken pity on Yartsev, who all the way back had spoken so feelingly about his family. Now Andrei realized that in war there could be no pity either for the enemy, or, if it came to it, for one's own people as well. And so, after the battalion commander's question he was the first to take two steps forward. He glanced at Yartsev the way he had at the Germans in Sukhaya Polyana—with an intense black glitter in his eyes.

"I do!" he said, his lips twitching violently. "That traitor! With my own hands! That dog!"

Sergeant Oleinik saw that in another instant both rows would take two steps forward. To anticipate them he quickly stepped up beside Andrei.

"I do!"

After him all the men stepped forward. Andrei and Oleinik were again in the centre of the first row.

"Five men are needed," Sharakshaneh said.

Yartsev looked at the men standing before him. They were all alike, like so many twin brothers. Yet one, in the centre, seemed more familiar than the rest. Yartsev stared at him. This familiar man was taller than the others, lean, swarthy of skin, and on the collar of his greatcoat gleamed sergeant's insignia.

"Oleinik?" Yartsev whispered voicelessly.

For some reason Kuzma Yartsev had not once thought of Oleinik either during the trial or after it. When he saw him now he threw up his hands and leaned forward to shout something.

But just then the volley rang out.

XX

All night long Ozerov's regiment continued to build up its sector of the defences. Hundreds of spades rang against the earth as the men deepened the winding trenches. They put the finishing touches to many log emplacements and dugouts and camouflaged them with sod, branches and rotting grass. In the places most vulnerable to attack by tanks the artillerymen set up anti-tank guns.

The German side was absolutely silent. Only

around midnight squadrons of German bombers headed for Moscow came over, shattering the heavens with their roar and frightening away the stars. After that many of the men kept glancing back as they worked, and soon they saw it: hundreds of sharp blades of fire began to pierce the black sky in the east, where the planes had gone. Voices rose in the trenches:

"They've greeted those bandits!"

"They'll greet them, all right! With a fist!"

"Dig! Why are you stopping?"

At dawn the groups of sappers who had been mining strips at the approaches to the defences began to return. One of the groups came up to the section of the trench held by Matvei Yurgin's platoon. The sappers were dragging a soldier on a cape-tent. Carefully they lowered him into the trench.

"What's the matter with him? Wounded?" Yurgin asked. "One of your men?"

"He was crawling," one of the sappers said briefly.

"Where to?"

"Here, of course."

"Who is he?"

"Looks as if he's the only one who knows that."

Matvei Yurgin turned his flashlight on the wounded man. He was unconscious. His face and

his clothes were all bloody and covered with mud. It was hard to believe that only a short while ago he could have been crawling. It was hard to believe that he could be alive.

"He was crawling, you say?" Yurgin asked.

"Crawling," the sapper sighed. "It's just a miracle. He was moaning and crawling, scratching at the earth, like this. The moment we spoke to him he lost consciousness."

Andrei came up along the trench from the other side. He squatted beside the wounded man's head and looked into his face by the light of the flashlight.

"Zhigalov?" he exclaimed in a startled voice. Then he cried out wildly, "Terenti! Zhigalov! Terenti!" A spasm locked his chest.

Terenti Zhigalov recovered consciousness while his face was being washed; they had decided to do that before placing him in a stretcher and taking him to the nearest medical aid station. He must have realized from the careful and affectionate way his face was wiped that he was among his own men. He began to move his lips, and Yurgin bent over to catch his words.

"Where ... is he?" Zhigalov whispered distinctly.

Some of the men thought Zhigalov was raving, but Andrei guessed he wanted to see him. He leaned over the stretcher. Andrei's lips trembled

and tears filmed his eyes. Deep in his heart his thoughts in the past twenty-four hours had centred chiefly about the fate of Zhigalov.

"Here I am, Terenti, here! See?"

"Ah," Zhigalov moaned. Then he said, "Thanks, friend...." The men picked up the stretcher, and he uttered one more phrase, very distinctly, "You saved me."

When Zhigalov had been taken away nobody moved for a minute.

"Just think of it: crawled all day and all night!" Osip Chernyshov said, shaking his head. "Why, he practically bled to death! What kept him alive? And what's keeping him alive now?"

"He'll go on living, too," Yurgin said. "A man like him shouldn't die. And he'll come back to us yet."

"A great rank and filer!" Chernyshov exclaimed in a voice filled with admiration.

Breakfast was brought up. The men went into the dugouts with their messtins.

After breakfast everybody lay down to rest. Andrei, however, did not feel like stretching out. For a long time he could not compose himself. Life persistently kept teaching him hatred for his enemies and love for his country, and Andrei thrilled as he felt these lessons become part of his flesh and blood, like the air he breathed; and,

like air, they were infusing his heart with new strength he had never known before.

He stepped outside.

It was broad daylight. Off at the sides guns were beginning to rumble but the regiment's sector was still silent. Here and there the helmets of observers glinted in the trenches. A cold north wind was blowing. The bushes and grass beyond the trench were coated with hoarfrost. Everything pointed to the approach of winter.

Matvei Yurgin's platoon had been stationed on a level, open stretch of land. From the central dugout of the platoon, where Oleinik's squad was quartered, a winding communication trench led back to Sharakshaneh's observation post on a small height and farther on to a low wood heavily thinned by shelling and chopping. To the west, where the enemy was, spread a large undulating field; behind it, like a rusty iron fence, rose a jagged band of forest, with two half-demolished huts at its edge. On a rise in the very centre of the field stood a slender white birch tree; it seemed to be standing there in indecision, wondering where to flee from that dangerous spot.

For some reason it reminded Andrei of the one on the roadside just outside Olkhovka, although both before and since he had seen many such solitary birches that autumn. He recalled the

night he had spent at home, Marika, his parents and his brother, and many other things that had become firmly fixed in his memory on that day filled with the noise of wind and falling leaves.

There was one other man in the squad who did not lie down for a long time that morning—Sergeant Oleinik. Soon after breakfast he also climbed out of the dugout and on seeing Andrei came up to him with his silent, catlike tread.

"Looking at something?" he asked Andrei from behind.

Andrei tore his glance away from the field.

"Convenient place here," Oleinik said, stepping up beside him. "Look at the field of fire. Infantry can never get through—they'll be mowed down by machine guns. And look at that orientation mark over there."

"Where?"

"There, on that rise."

"Orientation mark. . . ." Andrei remarked thoughtfully, and then added with a sigh, "It's a birch, a little white birch, that's what it is. When I look at it I can see the whole of our Russia." He fell silent for a moment. "Hard luck for her to have to stand in such a place."

"Yes, right in the line of fire."

Thus, talking about the birch tree, they greeted their first morning at the forward positions.

XXI

The second morning at the forward lines—the morning of a holiday, November Seventh—Ozerov's men greeted with a feeling of alarm: they all knew that the Germans were planning to attack their division's sector that day.

Lieutenant Matvei Yurgin lived with Oleinik's squad in the central dugout of the platoon. Out of habit he awoke at dawn. All around him in the darkness men were snoring under their greatcoats on the narrow bunks. They had been up late the evening before, preparing for battle: they had taken apart and cleaned their guns and stocked up on cartridges, grenades and fire bottles. Then Goncharov, the company political instructor, had come in and talked to them about the great anniversary on the morrow. They had sat up for a long time reminiscing about all the good ways they used to celebrate the holiday in peacetime. This had stirred them up so much that it was midnight before they lay down to sleep.

In the middle of the night it began to snow. For more than an hour the snow fell in thick, slanting sheets, like a heavy downpour of rain, and then a howling blizzard arose. By dawn the blizzard had changed the appearance of the entire area around Moscow. It had thickly blanketed the fields, filled in the gullies, blocked the forests

and plastered the windward sides of all the trees with snow from top to bottom. Winter had suddenly arrived, and to stay.

Matvei Yurgin knew that it was still early and he did not wish to waken the men before time, so he sat quietly on his bunk, going over the events of the summer in his mind. The air in the dugout was heavy from the pent-up smells of clothing, damp earth, fir branches and mouldy straw. In a tiny niche in a corner of the dugout a smoky little lamp flickered faintly.

"Wonder what the trench is like," Yurgin thought. "Probably full of snow."

He cautiously let himself down from the bunk, adjusted the wick of the lamp and lit the sticks of wood in the fireplace. His ear caught a sound and then the crunch of snow on the other side of the cape-tent hanging over the entrance to the dugout. He moved aside the edge of the cape-tent and through the snow saw the figure of a soldier with a rifle.

"Still alive in there?" the sentry asked. "I smelt smoke."

"That you, Medvedyev? Still blowing?"

"It is."

"Piled up high?"

"In the trench? In places it's blocked solid, Comrade Lieutenant. Just look at me." He clapped

his mittens together. "It's snowing hard and it's freezing cold—like Siberia."

"All quiet?"

"Yes, so far."

Yurgin walked over to the bunks and nudged Oleinik.

The sergeant jumped up in alarm. "Eh?"

"Wake up the men," Yurgin ordered. "The trenches have to be cleared before it gets light. We'll be floundering in snow if the battle starts. Hop to it. I'm going off to wake the other squads."

The platoon set to clearing the trenches with a will.

Half an hour later a messenger from the company commander ran up—a bright-eyed young soldier no taller than a rifle, plastered with snow from head to foot. As he came down the main trench he bumped into Umrikhin, who was grunting as he threw shovelfuls of snow far over the breastwork.

"Shoveling?" the messenger asked in a high, squeaky voice, shaking the snow off his coat.

Umrikhin did not stop working. "Come to help? Then start in right next to me. There's plenty of snow."

The messenger was hurt. "I'm from the company commander," he announced with boyish pride. "Where's your platoon commander? I was

only told to pass on an order to clear the trenches before it gets light. I haven't any time to dig here."

"We've got heads on our shoulders too, lad," Umrikhin replied. "What do we need your order for? We know what to do without being ordered. Step aside, now, or I'll scoop you into this shovel by accident and throw you over to the Germans."

The messenger was even more hurt. "You just tell me where the platoon commander is. And don't try to scare me."

"Get going, you giant—over there," Umrikhin said.

The messenger also handed Yurgin another order: to send a man from the platoon to regiment headquarters immediately. What for the messenger did not know. Yurgin delegated the resourceful Petro Semiglaz.

Petro Semiglaz returned when the platoon had finished clearing the trenches and the men, sweating from their exertions, had gone to their dugouts. He returned with a bulging army sack. Matvei Yurgin was absent from the dugout, and so as he dragged in the sack Petro Semiglaz informed the entire squad:

"Say, boys, what news I've got! Our major's commended our whole platoon! That's God's truth, may my eyes fall out! What for? For that

snow! For going out to clear it without being ordered. Understand? Oho, boys!"

"What did he want you for?" Oleinik asked from the fireplace.

"Just wait a minute, Comrade Sergeant, and I'll tell you." Semiglaz dragged the sack over to the bunks. "This is what he said: convey, he said, my thanks, and this into the bargain!"

Petro Semiglaz' fair lashes fluttered against his rosy schoolgirl cheeks. Untying the sack but not opening it, he turned to the men crowding around.

"Guess what's here!"

"Maybe it's an addition to those iron rations," Umrikhin suggested. The evening before they had been issued iron rations for two days, in the event of a long battle, but Umrikhin had managed to eat them up during the night. "If it's an addition then it'll do no harm, even the opposite."

"No, that's out—we've got our iron rations already."

"What else could it be?"

Semiglaz raised a finger and annouced in a solemn voice:

"Presents! That's what!"

"Making up things again! What presents?"

Semiglaz opened the sack. "Here, take a look. Well, see? Presents, boys, presents—so to say, from the whole country! And are they good! It's

turned out a regular holiday for us! We'll celebrate the birthday of our Soviet power in fine style, we will! Boys, just look at the attention we're getting!"

Then he started tossing the presents onto a bunk. The men gathered around in a close circle. From time to time he called the attention of his friends to a particular article, turning it about in front of their eyes or waving it, like a salesman displaying his wares, and then throwing it onto the bunk with a gesture meant to emphasize the fact that the heap was growing all the time. And there were indeed many presents: woolen sweaters, gloves, socks and scarfs, hats and sheepskin mittens, pouches of tobacco, cigarette cases and lighters, packages of cookies and candy, handkerchiefs girls had lovingly embroidered.... Nurgalei gave little squeals of delight as he shifted the presents at his feet; his face was beaded with sweat and his little black eyes danced.

"Ooh, present! Oh, my eyes run!"

The others also oh'd and ah'd.

"Say, ain't that wonderful!"

"Just look at what they've sent!"

"All kinds of winter things!"

"And tobacco, too! They know what we like!"

Knowing that Petro Semiglaz was a sharp fellow and inclined to be tricky, Medvedyev leaned over to Andrei from behind and whispered in his ear:

"I'll bet he dipped into that sack on the way!" Petro Semiglaz heard. He spun around.

"Dipped into it?" he shouted. "You say that? Why, I'll smack you one in the left ear that'll make your right ear bleed. You say that? These are presents, I tell you. People gave them from the bottom of their heart, maybe they gave their last bit for the front, and he—get out of here!"

It was rapidly growing light. The snowstorm was abating. Matvei Yurgin, who expected the battle to start at any minute, came in. After examining the presents he distributed a third of them among the men. The rest he put back into the sack and took to the other squads.

When he left, the dugout became noisier than ever. The grown men in greatcoats fussed over the presents like children, examining them endlessly and snatching them out of each other's hands. Letters were enclosed with many of the presents. From these the men learned who had sent them and from where. Sergeant Oleinik got a hand-knitted sweater and a pair of gloves from a woman in a kolkhoz in the Altais. Andrei also got a sweater, as well as a scarf, from a girl in Vladivostok. Umrikhin received a scarf and socks from a woman factory worker in the Urals; Osip Chernyshov, a cap sent by an old man from a kolkhoz in Vologda district and sheepskin mittens from a Moscow schoolboy; Petro Semiglaz, a warm shirt

from a Ukrainian woman and a pouch filled with tobacco from Georgia; Nurgalei, socks and gloves from Kazakhstan, and the others, various articles also from different regions of the country. When the presents had been looked over for the tenth time Andrei sat down on a bunk and said:

"It's true, they do come from the whole country...." He ran his hand over the fluffy grey scarf on his knee. "How far is it to Vladivostok? Who remembers?"

"Very far," Oleinik said.

"But just now I felt I could see that Vladivostok, far away as it is," Andrei said. "When I touched these things it seemed as if I could see all kinds of distant places.... Those blockheads!" he suddenly exclaimed, leaping up from the bunk, "Where've they come? What do they think they'll do? What can those bastards do to a country like this?"

The excitable Nurgalei also jumped up.

"Me—from Kazakhstan, you—from Vladivostok, you—from Siberia! Let me say! Wait! Wait!" he shouted, his face gleaming with sweat. "Let me speak! I want very much to speak! Do not butt in, please!"

"A speech, eh?" Umrikhin asked.

"You want? Please! Only do not butt in."

Umrikhin waved his huge hand at Nurgalei.

"Now, now, my boy, no speech. Don't spoil our

holiday. Right now this scarf means more to me than any orator."

Nurgalei's feelings were hurt.

"Understand! You understand nothing!"

"As much as you do, anyway," Umrikhin rejoined. Then he suggested, "Let's open the letters, eh? What's in them?"

The men began to read the letters. They were all short, but permeated with infinite concern and bright hope.

As they read the letters the men quietened down. They exchanged brief comments:

"What's yours about?"

"Moscow."

"Mine too."

"Look—congratulations!"

"Want to read mine? Here."

Osip Chernyshov was the only one who could not calm down. Always staid and reserved, he was now lively and talkative. He went around showing everybody his letter, written on a sheet from a school notebook.

"Here, look! See who's writing? Just a kid, I swear!" He sighed and shook his head. "But you just take a look. I swear the handwriting is just like my Semka's. See how clear it is? His heart must be no bigger than a sparrow's and he—he already feels for us, brother. Yes, a fine kid!"

"What does he write?" Umrikhin asked.

"Why, I haven't read it yet!"

"Well, you read it and stop bothering other people. A grown-up man with kids of your own, and you're pestering everybody like a little boy."

"So would you." Osip Chernyshov tapped his chest. "Maybe it's all raw inside, do you know that?"

Matvei Yurgin was amazed by the stillness in the dugout when he returned. The men sat smoking in silence, their faces set; some were inspecting their guns once more.

XXII

That holiday morning, the first morning of winter, Moscow met in unusual fashion. Under a low, frowning sky the huge capital lay besmeared with motley camouflage paint and heavily coated with snow. Everywhere the wind fluttered the flags; it whirled the snow on the broad squares and swept it down the side streets. In the deserted parks, where flocks of red-breasted bullfinches had already appeared, girls in dark-blue overalls were bustling around silver barrage balloons. Along the streets sped covered army trucks, throwing up clouds of snow in their wake. Hoarsely, as though they had caught cold, the loudspeakers on the corners announced anxious war news. On the city outskirts, shrouded in a white haze, the factory whistles called challengingly in the frosty air.

That morning nobody in Moscow thought about a celebration of the kind the capital had been famous for before the war. Each marked the great holiday in his own heart. Everybody set to work with a special will, aware that in their labour to strengthen the capital lay its salvation and its future. Moscow began that morning with grim and inspired labour.

Long before, all the German newspapers had announced that on November Seventh, the birthday of Soviet power in Russia, the German army would hold a parade in the vanquished capital, Moscow.

But life has its own laws.

On the morning of November Seventh, Moscow witnessed the traditional parade of Red Army units across Red Square.

XXIII

Early in the morning a closed truck from Army Headquarters drove up to the advance positions held by Ozerov's regiment. The truck was parked in a safe place—a gully in the forest about three hundred metres behind the defence line. Then a wire was led from it to the edge of the wood and a loudspeaker which looked like a huge blossoming bluebell was fastened to a fir sapling. And when the parade opened in Moscow, over the labyrinth of trenches with its numerous secret underground

dwellings, over the snowy wind-swept fields for several kilometres around, drowning all other sounds, rang out the calm, forceful words of Stalin:

"The enemy calculated that after the very first blow our Army would be dispersed, and our country would be forced to her knees. But the enemy sadly miscalculated. . . ."

Attentive faces peered out of all the dugouts and log emplacements. All along the trenches helmets flashed into sight. The men drank in the leader's every word with the same feeling as though they were stocking up on bullets and grenades before a battle.

"The enemy is not so strong," rang out over the defences, "as some frightened little intellectuals imagine. The devil is not so terrible as he is painted. . . ."

The men in Oleinik's dugout listened to the leader in silence with the exception of Umrikhin, who to everybody's disgust insisted on talking. In the brief pauses between sentences he never failed to grab somebody by the sleeve, wink enthusiastically and offer a comment or simply say, "Hear that, brother? That's something!"

Andrei finally lost his temper. "Shut your trap, you!" he said, pushing him away from the entrance.

In the back of the dugout Umrikhin could not

hear so well. "Seems a bit hoarse now, doesn't it?" he remarked to Osip Chernyshov.

"It's coming over the radio. What do you expect?" Chernyshov explained irritably. He stepped away from Umrikhin. "And stop bothering me."

"What if he catches cold! It's a raw day, and he's getting on in years—"

"Damn you for saying a thing like that! Shut up!"

"I didn't mean anything," Umrikhin said, backing into a corner of the dugout. "You too—blowing off steam like the regiment kitchen!"

The leader's words thundered out over the field....

Major Ozerov stood listening in the little trench near the entrance to his dugout at the observation post. Knowing that the Germans would attack that day, he had moved to the post while it was still dark. The men and officers attached to the regiment staff were clustered in the trenches that ran to the neighbouring dugouts. The only one who was not gazing toward the rear, from where the words of the leader were coming, was an observer perched on a little board platform in a shaggy fir nearby. He looked steadily into the west, and the west only.

"Listen to that!" he called down in boyish glee, bending over. "I bet even the Germans can hear!"

The next instant he huddled up against the trunk

of the fir. German batteries had opened fire from beyond the dark band of forest in the west.

Ozerov gave a start. "Into the slits!" he quickly ordered.

The men scattered.

A few seconds later a gigantic moan filled the air and a whistling and whining sounded over the defences; hundreds of points of flame showered up, as though the earth had crashed into something at full speed; branches and needles showered down from the trees; a pall of snow and smoke rose over the entire line held by the regiment, and crash after crash rolled out in all directions. Flocks of birds were swept up from the snowy woods into the overcast sky and borne away to the east....

The Germans had begun their artillery preparation.

The observer tumbled down from the fir. He rolled over once in the snow, crawled to the trench on all fours and jumped into the regiment commander's dugout. Without stopping to shake the snow off himself he huddled into a corner and began to hiccup loudly, clawing at his chest and looking around wildly at the men in the dugout.

"It'll pass," Ozerov said reassuringly.

The barrage was extremely heavy and seemed to take in the entire sector held by the regiment. Only rarely could individual explosions be distinguished—all over the line there was a solid, deaf-

ening crash and thunder and grinding. The earth shuddered, and sometimes so violently that trees bumped into one another and sent down showers of branches, needles and cones. At times the earth's crust seemed to be sliding down some precipice. The air became heavy with the smells of gunpowder smoke and charred iron. All along the line flames licked the air and thick, choking banks of smoke rose up, as from a huge forest fire. The sky darkened. An awe-inspiring gloom, like during an eclipse of the sun, descended.

But at the edge of the wood the loudspeaker was still thundering, and occasionally the leader's words, transmitted from Moscow, broke through and carried out over the area:

"May you be inspired by... banner of the great Lenin!"

"Death to the German invaders!"

The air in Ozerov's dugout became dusty. It felt as though the dugout were being pushed this way and that without a stop. Earth sifted down from between the logs of the ceiling, and big clods fell from the walls. Petya Uralets removed his hand from the smoky little lamp, and it was immediately swept off the table. The observer, who had recovered somewhat from the terror that had gripped him on the fir, found the lamp in the dark and relit it.

"Hold it!" Ozerov shouted to him.

... Ozerov had been all keyed up in anticipation of that battle. He realized that it would be a severe and important test of the regiment's staunchness, of the inner forces with which it was imbued during those days of the great Battle of Moscow. He realized that the honour and glory of his regiment depended upon the outcome of the battle. Accordingly, all through the last few days his mind had been occupied with one thought—how best to prepare the regiment. In a brief time he had accomplished many jobs, big and small, to strengthen the line; in their entirety they were to be the cornerstone of the future victory. While carrying out this preparatory work, by his appearance and his conduct and everything he did he filled his men with the conviction that was as firm in him as, say, his belief that winter would soon come; this he did almost without being aware of it himself, and imperceptibly to the others. He fixed up his dugout at the command post with all the comforts possible at the forward lines. He even took in a cat which he had picked up in an abandoned village nearby. After that the whole regiment began to talk.

"Heard how our major's settled down? Well, brother, it looks like this is for long. He's even got a cat. Looks like we'll make a firm stand here."

Major Ozerov had implicit faith in the ability of his regiment to withstand any enemy attack. And

the faith of a commanding officer is passed on to his men along invisible threads; it is like electrical energy, and, like electric bulbs, the men's hearts glow with greater or lesser intensity depending upon its force: dimly, if his faith is weak, and with a cheerful, dazzling light if it is strong.

And now the battle had begun.

Notwithstanding his firm belief that his regiment would win, a stab shot through Major Ozerov's heart when the Germans opened their barrage. Once again (for the nth time) he became alive to the responsibility that rested upon him for the outcome of the battle and for the lives of the hundreds of men under his command. All morning long he had been mentally checking up on how he had prepared the regiment for battle, examining everything with the eye of a sceptical outsider. It had turned out that everything required had been done, and done well, despite the hurry. But now when he returned to these thoughts, for some reason he suddenly began to discover various shortcomings: he recalled that a gun had not been set up in ambush in the centre of the line as he had wished; that reserve cables had not been laid to the battalions; that the regiment's ammunition supply depot had not been moved up closer to the lines, as planned.... Just then Ozerov noticed that he was unconsciously making all sorts of unnecessa-

ry motions—now flicking dust from the map, now looking into his dispatch case for no particular reason, now rubbing his eyes with his handkerchief. "I've got to stop this!" he told himself firmly. "What's come over me?" The thought flashed through his mind that Stalin was probably still standing on the platform and that his calm, even voice was ringing out over the land. Instantly his worries fled, like dead leaves carried away before the wind. All the shortcomings taken together did not, of course, constitute a flaw that might weaken the regiment. "Never mind!" he said to himself, setting his jaw. "We'll hold out!" And knowing how a commander's mood always infects those around him, he cast a quick and worried look at the men in his dugout.

There were two officers from headquarters, the commander of the signal platoon, observers, messengers and telephone operators. All were hugging the walls, crowding back as far as they could from the door. They held their fingers in their ears, and every time the dugout shook heavily and lumps of earth fell off the walls they milled about in confusion. The observer was huddled in the corner again and the lamp he held flickered feebly. The only calm person was Petya Uralets. Sitting on a bunk, he held his head with its high forehead at a stubborn angle and pressed the cat to his chest. The cat was trying to break away; its whiskers

twitched and its eyes glittered like the sparks from green rockets in a night sky.

"What's the matter, pussy, scared?" Ozerov shouted for everybody in the dugout to hear. "Got a scare? Tsk, tsk!"

Ozerov sat down on a bunk, took the cat from his orderly, held her up in front of him and shouted still louder:

"Don't be scared, pussy! The devil is not so terrible as he is painted. Hear that? Why do you want to run away? You silly thing, just look at the men: nobody's afraid. That's all right, they'll make some noise and then they'll stop. But you just wait and see, pussy, how we'll give it to them! You just wait!"

Many of the men moved away from the walls to hear what he was shouting to the cat. The observer crawled out of his corner, winked at the cat and began to adjust the wick of the little lamp.

"It'll pass!" he called out, reassured.

Ozerov's blue eyes crinkled with laughter. He bent over to Petya Uralets and, waving his left arm, shouted into his orderly's ear:

"Play!"

The day before, the traveling club of the division had sent the regiment an accordion. Major Ozerov had turned it over to Petya Uralets, who had the reputation of being a good accordion play-

er, and told him to have it handy all the time. The major had developed a fondness for the accordion during his youth, spent in a Siberian village.

"Play what?" Petya asked as he reached for the accordion in the corner.

"The one about Moscow. You know it?"

Petya Uralets settled the accordion in his lap.

The crash and roar at the forward line did not abate. The dugout was getting such a shaking that they all felt as if they were hurtling over a bumpy, rutted track on a dark night in a carriage drawn by a team of mad horses who had taken the bit in their mouth, and at any moment the carriage might receive the final jolt that would smash it to splinters.... But Major Ozerov sat on the earth-strewn bunk hugging the cat and, swaying in time to the music, sang the song about Moscow to the accompaniment of the accordion:

Unbreakable!
Unshakable!
A city strong and wondrous fair!
Oh country mine!
Oh Moscow mine!
The capital beyond compare!

He was not sure of the words with the exception of the chorus, which he repeated several times.

When he paused to glance at his watch he noted with surprise that all the men in the dugout had chimed in.

Oh country mine!
Oh Moscow mine!
The capital beyond compare!

XXIV

A white hare bounded insanely across the smoky field, all over which shells were bursting with splashes of flame. At one point it was about to take cover under a rose-brier bush, but there was a blinding flash and it was thrown up into the air. With a piercing squeal it freed itself from the soft snow, which smelled of gunpowder smoke, leaped to the side—and landed in a trench. For a few seconds it twisted and hopped about frantically, scratching at the abrupt clay walls. Then, looking around, it dashed madly down the empty trench littered with clods of charred earth and full of acrid smoke. Again it was blinded and tossed up. It came to a sharp bend in the trench and there, exhausted, deaf to the noises around, it huddled up in a ball and froze in terror.

...When the barrage started, Sergeant Oleinik, who had been complaining of a stomach-ache since early morning, suddenly had a vomiting fit. He fell down near the fireplace, moaning and retch-

ing with an effort that racked his whole body; he clutched at his breast, shook his head and, closing his eyes weakly, wiped his wet lips with his palm.

Matvei Yurgin leaned over in the semidarkness and prodded him. "What've you eaten, you son of a bitch?" he shouted angrily above the thunder of the barrage.

"Oh, go away!" Oleinik moaned. "What's the matter with me? . . . Could it be from that canned meat I ate?"

"When it quietens down you go to the aid station, hear?"

"I'll lay here. Maybe it'll pass."

"What's the sense of that? You know what's going to happen here?"

"I'll do some fighting yet."

"A hell of a fighter you are!"

Matvei Yurgin saw that Oleinik would not be fit for action soon. He crawled over to the corner near the entrance to the dugout where the guns were stacked. Here Andrei, in a greatcoat and helmet, sat with his shoulder pressed against the wall. Yurgin poked his friend and shouted:

"You take over! Understand?"

Andrei's white teeth flashed in the gloom.

"Yes!"

"Don't be hotheaded!" Yurgin cautioned. "Understand? Keep cool and use your head. Hear?"

The thunder over the line continued unabated

All of a sudden the dugout was shaken so violently that everybody stood stock-still. There was a deafening crash of iron and wood, lumps of earth showered down, the messtins jangled.... A shell had torn into a corner of the dugout, loosening the top layer of roof logs and pushing one log from the bottom layer almost onto the bunks; from the corner, where a patch of grey sky showed, came a draft of cold air mingled with acrid smoke. Up to then many of the men had been holding back their fear by exerting all their will power. But now they all huddled in the dark corners of the dugout and under the bunks, oblivious of the fact that they were trembling as with the ague.

Andrei was no novice, but like many others in the regiment he was experiencing the horrors of a furious artillery preparation for the first time. Every moment, as he sat there hunched over, he expected another shell to hit the dugout—and then.... But he did not want to think about what would happen then. He had already trained himself not to think about death. The minutes sped by one by one, and his entire being was tense with the anticipation of an explosion overhead. "If it only doesn't come!" he exclaimed to himself every once in a while. But although his being was frozen in anticipation, deep in his heart there glimmered a hope that it would all end favourably—and then.... And about what would happen then, when it had all

ended favourably, he thought eagerly during those few seconds when he was capable of thinking.

Before, Andrei had regarded his participation in battle as a stern necessity. But on the way back from the medical battalion, when he saw how much labour the people at large had put into the defence of Moscow, he had experienced for the first time an aching, heart-tugging desire to come to grips with the enemy as soon as possible. The events of the past few days in the regiment had made this desire even keener.

But waiting for a second shell to burst overhead and shatter the dugout to smithereens was terrifying. He soon lost count of time, as had the others in the dugout. It seemed to them all that the barrage had been going on for an infinitely long time. The men breathed with difficulty, their chests locked by a spasm. Some were even beginning to lose their fear....

Though they were all straining to catch it, not one of the men heard the roar of the barrage break off. The only one who did was Matvei Yurgin. He snatched up a pair of grenades and shouted into the interior of the dugout:

"After me! Into the trench!"

Many were surprised to hear his voice, but nobody understood what he was shouting and nobody budged. Yurgin began to pull at the men in the semidarkness. "Into the trench! To your places!"

The men finally realized that the earth was no longer trembling and that the crash of bursting shells over their dugout had stopped. They picked up their guns.

Dashing out of the dugout, Yurgin saw the quivering white bundle in the bend of the trench. "A hare!" He knelt and cautiously stretched out his hands. He expected the hare to leap away in fright, but it only trembled and shrank back. Yurgin caught it. Then he turned to the men, who were already running past him in the trench. "Hurry up!" he shouted.

The men, armed with rifles and grenades, scrambled past Yurgin one after the other without noticing the hare in his arms. Bumping into the walls of the trench in their haste, they scattered in both directions. Only Umrikhin, who was the last to run out, paused beside Yurgin. "A hare? he gasped. "How'd it get here?"

Smoke was still rising from the field and snowflakes were whirling in the air. Lone shells whined by high overhead and crashed beyond the wood: the Germans were shifting their fire deeper into the defences. In the west there was the muffled drone of motors, and rockets showered sparks in the frowning sky.

"For the pot, eh?" Umrikhin said with a nod at the hare.

"Get to your place! Hear me?" Yurgin advanced

on him, his narrowed brown eyes glittering. "I'll show you the pot!" He shook his fist at Umrikhin, who ran over to his place at a crouch.

Yurgin saw that his other squads had also come out; helmeted figures were moving all along the trench. He raised the hare high over his head, as though showing it the near-by wood to the east, then set it down quickly on the blackened snow behind the trench.

"Run for it now, my little one!"

The smoke cleared completely, and the entire field up to the band of forest, from which the rockets were soaring, came into view. German tanks appeared at the far end of the field. They rumbled toward the defences, whirling up the snow. Behind them the tiny figures of German soldiers could be seen. Shouts and the clang of steel against steel rose over the defences.

Yurgin ran down the trench, crying at the top of his voice:

"Get grenades ready! Fire bottles! Don't waver!"

Andrei set up his machine gun on the platform. Next to it the short Nurgalei, who did not have to crouch over in the trench, began to lay down magazine drums, grenades and fire bottles, casting quick glances at Andrei. Umrikhin took up his stand a bit to the left. The other men also took

their places. From the way they laid their rifles on the breastwork and from their talk Andrei realized that the harrowing fear they had experienced in the dim dugout had given way to a new feeling: now they were eager to live and to act as the battle would demand. Andrei no longer felt the least afraid. He was only tired after the long waiting for another explosion in the dugout, and his helmet seemed so heavy and tight that his ears rang. But in the fresh air his breathing came easier with each second; and with each second he foretasted more and more the elation he would experience in battle.

The leading tanks were now approaching the rise topped by the glistening white birch. Their infantry followed close behind. Machine guns in some of the emplacements opened up at them. Then crisp rifle reports rang out. A few of the tanks promptly answered: with cannon fire at the emplacements they had spotted and machine-gun fire at the trench.

"Bo-oys!" Andrei shouted, glancing around. "At the infantry! Make the dogs spit blood!"

Nurgalei could not wait. He pressed the trigger of the machine gun and fired a whole drum. Then. noticing Andrei beside him, he shouted. his black eyes flashing and his face beaded with sweat, as it always was when he became excited:

"They burn! German finished! He lay down and die!"

Andrei had not heard our anti-tank guns ambushed at the forward edge open rapid point-blank fire at the tanks. Two of the machines indeed had stopped near the rise with the birch and were throwing up thick clouds of smoke that might have come from a forest tar works; then, in a flash, pointed leaves of flame burst forth from their steel bellies. A second later, evidently from an inner explosion, one of the tanks reared up and flew to pieces, and a column of smoke spurted skyward. The other tanks increased their speed and came on faster, their guns pounding. At that point our heavy batteries in concealed positions came to the assistance of the small anti-tank guns. A piercing whine filled the air and the section of the field across which the tanks were moving shuddered with the crash and the rumble.

"Our guns, eh?" Umrikhin shouted.

"Ours!" Andrei replied. "Can't you see?"

"O-o-o!" Umrikhin gasped. Thinking that Andrei would be able to hear him, he waved his arm and cried, "That's giving it to them! Not like near that little river! Remember? Oh boy! Oh mother of mine! Andrei! Andrei!" He pressed up against the wall of the trench. "No-o-o, now they won't get us! Andrei, everything's all right! Now they won't get us!"

Our batteries kept up a steady fire. A blanket of smoke spread over the field in front of the regiment's positions. Many of the tanks disappeared from sight. Some were tearing about madly, spurting fire. But two broke through the zone of fire and advanced on the line held by Matvei Yurgin's platoon. Without infantry support there was now no purpose to their charging the trench, but the tankmen were infuriated by their setback.

The gun on the platoon's sector managed to fire several shells point-blank into the leading tank. It turned and, treads grinding, zigzagged back, showing a peacock's tail of flame and smoke. But the second tank spotted the gun and put it out of commission with one accurate shot. Now that it had cleared its path to the trench it came on, not too slowly and not too fast, evidently wary of mines, heading straight for Andrei and his comrades.

All that followed probably took no more than three minutes. But Andrei was unaware of the speed with which he thought and acted, and so he thought that the battle with the tank lasted quite a while.

This was his second encounter with a tank. And although the first, back on the other side of the Vazuza, had ended unsuccessfully, it had taught him something. Besides, his countless talks with men who had fought back tank attacks had fur-

nished him with a store of sundry and useful information. That was sufficient for him now to accept battle with the armoured hulk courageously. And so when he saw that the artillery would not be able to check the tank for fear of hitting our own men and that he would have to fight it with manual weapons, he felt no fear. He was gripped by but a single desire—the one which had been persistently calling him to battle in recent days.

He swept the machine gun and the drums from the platform, got an anti-tank grenade ready, shouted to Umrikhin and Nurgalei to prepare also, straightened his helmet, squatted in the trench to rehearse the throw, and then froze in waiting, tense, his blood on fire. The enemy tank advanced, trying to rake the trench with machine-gun fire from time to time. Some of the bullets bit into the earth in front of the breastwork while others stitched the snow on its top. Andrei could not raise his head over the trench to see how close the tank was. He had to strain all his senses to catch the moment when the unseen tank would be about thirty metres away and its bullets no longer swept the top of the breastwork but passed over considerably higher. Missing that moment meant being too late to throw his grenade: the tank would rumble over the trench. Of all the remaining seconds before the encounter with the tank just that one second had to be caught.

The thunder of battle made it difficult for Andrei to gauge the precise moment for the throw. When he could not hear bullets overhead, some sixth sense told him that the tank was still far away. The strain of waiting threw him into a heavy sweat. He was so tense and keyed up that it was hard to stand still. The thought flashed through his mind that the tank might suddenly swerve, and he grew frightened: he knew that with the exception of Umrikhin none of the men in his squad had ever met tanks, and that in this first encounter they might lose their heads and let the tank pass over the trench. "If only it doesn't turn!" Andrei wished fervently. "If it only comes on me!"

A stream of bullets whistled by far overhead. Andrei felt a rush of heat: this was the moment. With a feeling of vast relief that set his spirits soaring, Andrei quickly straightened up behind the breastwork. The tank was just crossing the line at which he had hoped to catch it. Crying out with joy, he hurled his grenade under the tank with furious and triumphant force.

It exploded with a crash.

Lumps of earth showered down into the trench, a gust of snow swept over and whirls of smoke rose. Andrei was just about to peep out of the trench when a second explosion rang out, then a third and a fourth.... Umrikhin, Petro Semiglaz,

Osip Chernyshov and Kovalchuk, who had run up to assist Andrei, had thrown their grenades at the tank. Immediately after the grenade bursts the hot-headed Nurgalei, as agile as a squirrel, leaped out of the trench with two fire bottles. Though the tank was badly damaged it still had venomous, fire-breathing life. It turned about to retreat. Heedless of danger, Nurgalei dashed up to it and smashed both bottles against its armour one after another. Streams of fire rolled down the sides of the tank; it began to emit a thick, foul smoke that smelled of rotten eggs.

Andrei saw none of this: dirt had blown into his eyes. But soon he heard the men at the sides rejoicing, and then, quite near, Yurgin's voice:

"Fine work, boys! That's the way!"

"We showed them! We certainly did!" Umrikhin roared, evidently in reply. "They'll remember it all their lives! That's the way to greet them!"

From behind the wood in back there arose a roar and a whistle as though a powerful geyser had burst through the earth's crust and uprooted scores of trees.

R-r-ry-yk! Ry-y-yk!

A few seconds later curly waves of fire sprang up all over the far edge of the field, toward which the undamaged German tanks and scattered soldiers

were retreating. Banks of smoke shut out the west.

"Oh mother of mine!" Umrikhin moaned joyously.

"That's the 'Katyusha'!" Yurgin explained at the top of his voice.

Andrei was dying to look out at the battlefield at that moment, but he was still bent over in the trench rubbing his eyes....

XXV

Soon after, the Germans threw tanks against the other sectors of the regiment's line. Meanwhile, as if in revenge for the defeat, several German batteries launched a hurricane of fire at Sharakshaneh's sector.

Again everybody sat in the dugouts for a few minutes while the whine of shells and the crash of explosions filled the smoky gloom outside.

A few minutes before the shelling began, Sergeant Oleinik was sent to the medical unit: contrary to his expectations, his poisoning was so severe and the vomiting had so weakened him that he would not be able to return to action soon. In the first few minutes of the barrage Andrei was wounded in the ear by a shell splinter. An aid man dressed

his wound in the dugout. When the roar of the explosions subsided the aid man advised him to go back to the rear also.

"Go ahead, they'll sew up your ear," he said as he rummaged in his bag. "It's split, like a hog's ear."

"Go back for an ear? The hell with it—let it be split! It'll heal up, like a hog's."

"But it won't look so nice, you know."

"What do I need a pretty ear for? Now get out of my way."

And Andrei dashed out of the dugout.

From the commands and shouts he heard in the trench he immediately grasped that the German infantry was attacking. This was amazing, inexplicable. Why should the infantry suddenly go in where tanks had failed? But a glance out over the breastwork convinced him that this was the case: a huge grey crowd was moving across the snowy, shell-pocked field. It was already nearing the rise topped by the birch around which lay smashed and burned-out German tanks. This meant the Germans had emerged from the forest and covered part of the way while their barrage was raging over the defences.

"Drums!" Andrei shouted.

Nurgalei shoved a drum into his hands.

As he loaded the machine gun Andrei heard Yurgin call out:

"Let them come closer! Fire point-blank!"

"We ought to spray them with that 'Katyusha'!" Umrikhin exclaimed.

As they reloaded their rifles, all the men waited for the awe-inspiring "Katyusha," which they had never yet seen, to roar out from behind the wood and engulf that whole mass of men in curly waves of fire....

But meanwhile at the regiment commander's observation post the following scene was taking place:

The observer in the fir tree put down his field glasses and began to push aside the branches around him. Noticing Major Ozerov emerge from the dugout in a white camouflage cape, he leaned over the platform, holding onto a branch, and reported anxiously:

"Comrade Major, those are our men!"

"What do you mean ours?"

"Honest to goodness, they're ours! In our greatcoats! And unarmed!"

Major Ozerov raised his glasses to his eyes.

Coming across the snowy field was not the usual German skirmish line but a huge crowd of unarmed, floundering and falling men in tattered grey Russian greatcoats. He could see their faces clearly. They were Russians beyond any doubt. In a flash Ozerov realized that the Germans were using Rus-

sian prisoners to screen their advance; it was said they often did that.

"What about behind?" Ozerov called out, lifting his eyes to the fir. "Anybody there?"

"Well, behind.... There is somebody! Germans, Comrade Major!"

"Rockets!" Ozerov yelled into the dugout.

A white rocket soared upward with a hiss and described a delicate arc in the air. The second rocket flew higher, and its light was sharper and more alarming.

Yurgin froze. "What's that? Hold fire?" He caught Andrei by the shoulder; Andrei had not noticed the rockets and was taking aim to open fire from his machine gun. "Wait!"

Commands flew out over the trench:

"As you were!"

"Wait! Don't shoot!"

All along the line helmets popped up.

The grey avalanche of men, spread out about two hundred metres in width, advanced steadily toward the defences. Examining it intently, Matvei Yurgin also suddenly realized to his horror what the Germans were doing, and he began to tremble so violently that he placed the grenades he had been holding since the beginning of the battle on the ledge of the trench lest he drop them. He wanted to do something, to shout something to the men of his platoon, but he had

neither the strength nor the voice. He did not lose his head—that he never did—but what the Germans were doing was so staggering, so criminal and inhuman, that for a few seconds he lost heart completely.

But by the time the others in the trench were just beginning to grasp the situation, Matvei Yurgin had taken himself in hand and was thinking clearly and quickly. He saw that the German plan was simple: the Russians would not, of course, fire upon their own men, and this would enable the Germans to come up to the trench hidden behind the crowd. When the crowd poured into the trench and mixed with the soldiers, they would shower both the one and the other with grenades and then break through to the interior of the regiment's defences. Yurgin understood that if the crowd of prisoners poured into the trench such confusion would arise that his men would not be able to meet the enemy properly. But what was he to do? Precious seconds were passing. Several times he looked around. None of the senior officers had issued any new commands. Meanwhile the column of prisoners was coming nearer and nearer. He had to make an independent decision. And he decided that if a hand-to-hand engagement was inevitable, then it had to be not in the crowded trench but a few dozen metres in front of it and should take the enemy by surprise.

Yurgin snatched up his grenades and gave the order to prepare to attack. The order passed from man to man up and down the trench.

Andrei ran up to Yurgin. "Comrade Lieutenant! Those are Russians!"

"I know! But behind them there's Germans!"

Yurgin began to shout again, explaining to his men that they had to pass through the crowd of prisoners and then come at the Germans with their bayonets. After he heard his order being repeated all through the platoon, he climbed out of the trench, stood on the breastwork and looked to left and right.

"Follow me-e-e!" he cried out.

All along the line the men went over the top.

As he hurried them on Yurgin heard the rumble of motors on the flanks. At Ozerov's orders our T-34 tanks ambushed in the woods had charged the field. Raising clouds of snow, they sped far out into the open terrain and when almost on a level with the crowd started machine-gun fire from both sides. Hundreds of shrieks rose from the crowd; the prisoners wavered in confusion and started back, knocking some of their number off their feet, but then they rushed forward again to the trench. The tanks continued to fire from both sides and to close in on the crowd. Yurgin finally grasped their purpose: they were firing at the Ger-

mans to cut them off from the prisoners, permitting the latter to move ahead.

Matvei Yurgin rejoiced that his decision, his first independent combat decision, and such an important one, had been correct. Its execution was now facilitated by the arrival of the tanks on the field. He jumped down from the breastwork and ran toward the crowd.

His men dashed after him.

"This way!" he shouted frenziedly, waving a grenade. "Hurry up!"

As it neared the trench the crowd of prisoners thinned out noticeably: those who were strong broke forward, realizing that salvation had come; the weak and wounded came on behind, panting, falling, the skirts of their ragged greatcoats dragging in the snow. Matvei Yurgin's platoon ran into the thinned crowd.

The platoon had but one objective: to push through the crowd of prisoners as quickly as possible and attack the Germans in the wake of the tanks, which were already roaring up in front. But the prisoners rushed up to the soldiers with happy cries and tears of joy. The emaciated, bearded men, bareheaded and half-naked or in tatters and filthy bandages, panting from weakness and sobbing, began to throw themselves upon the soldiers and embrace them with incoherent cries of gratitude. Their hearts were so overflowing with the happi-

ness that had suddenly come to them on the battlefield that they were in no condition to understand anything and nothing could stop their shouts and their tears.

"Let us pass, let us pass!" the soldiers shouted on all sides as they pushed through the crowd. "Later, later!"

"Goodness!" Umrikhin exclaimed time and again. He was the tallest and most noticeable, and the prisoners were holding him up more than the others. "Gone crazy? Let me pass, brothers! Don't hold me back!"

It was with great difficulty that they broke through the crowd. Behind it the sick, the wounded and the exhausted were dragging themselves along. One of the prisoners, a tall young fellow with a torn tunic over his bandaged chest, kept trying to break away from his two comrades who were supporting him.

"So you're hiding behind our backs, you damn dogs!" he shouted hoarsely. "Afraid? And we—with our bodies—never! Down with them! Shoot me down on the spot first! I won't go! I don't want to!"

The hearts of the men filled with fury. Their eyes gleaming fiercely, they burst forward after the tanks, and the Russian battle cry resounded over the field:

"Hur-rah!"

The rest of the company streamed out of the trenches to support Matvei Yurgin. Our counterattack began. Rifle fire and grenade bursts rang out over the open field where the confused German skirmish lines had dropped to the ground.

Then our batteries spoke up again. In a solid whining stream the shells flew high over the part of the field where the men were wiping out the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting. Over the German positions a huge, unbreaking curly wave of fire reared up. Nocturnal darkness shrouded the entire west.

XXVI

Toward evening the roar of battle subsided.

The Germans had launched several furious attacks at Ozerov's regiment during the day, but they had not succeeded in moving a single step closer to Moscow. In front of the regiment's positions dozens of German tanks had been smashed or set on fire and hundreds of Germans killed.

The forward trenches emptied out. The men and officers crowded into the cold and damp dugouts smelling of decaying straw and fir branches. Only the sentries remained at their posts. All along the forward edge the specially alert front-line silence quickly deepened. It was broken only occasionally

by the voices of the men of the burial squad, who were going through the trenches looking for the dead and collecting their weapons. Here and there wisps of smoke curled up from the earth as the chilled men, unable to wait for complete darkness, kindled fires in their underground dwellings.

Andrei did not rest after the battle: he gulped down a chunk of bread and was the first in his squad to take up sentry duty in the trench. Only those who had known him well in recent days would have recognized him now after the long hours of intense fighting. This was no longer the quiet, handsome, thoughtful young fellow the people of Olkhovka had known, but a man with a stern, harsh expression and a dark, wary look in his eyes—the look of men who have seen death and learned that it is not always all-powerful. His left ear was bandaged with a grimy strip of gauze and there was a white patch on his right cheek where he had been scratched by a shell splinter. The new coat he had taken such good care of before the battle was now muddy and torn in several places.

Andrei had difficulty in keeping on his feet: he could feel all his joints aching. But the shooting pains and his extreme weariness were alleviated by a feeling of special happiness. He could not understand when and why this feeling had come to him, but he knew for certain that he was experiencing it for the first time in his life.

Loading his rifle and straightening his helmet, he drew himself up to his full height in the trench and looked out over the battlefield. Above the distant black band of forest a pale sunset was fading. The haze of twilight was creeping up everywhere, but a keen eye could see far. The entire field had been ploughed up by shells and mines. In some places the first snow had been swept away completely, as though by some iron broom; in others there was a charred mixture of earth and snow. All over the field stood black heaps of metal that only recently had been alive and powerful; from some, yellowish wisps of smoke were still curling. On all the remaining patches of snow there were the black dots of bodies.... And just as in the morning, on the naked little rise in the midst of that shambles where fire and steel had raged throughout the day and where death had trampled everything, stood the lone white birch, glowing softly in the twilight.

"Still there?" Andrei whispered in amazement. "It survived?"

And Andrei felt that there was something very significant and portentous in the fact that like some sacred thing this birch—the beautiful tree of song—had survived such a furious battle in that unsheltered place. Nature herself had set it there to decorate the drab field, and hence nature herself had endowed it with immortality. And Andrei felt

that new sensation well up even stronger within him. But now he knew what it was: the joy of victory. He was happy that he had become a real soldier, that in the evening he was standing in the same place where he had begun the battle in the morning. He kept his rapturous gaze on the birch for a few seconds, and then, placing his hand on the ledge of the trench, said with great solemnity and rejoicing in his heart, as though making a vow to the earth itself:

"And it will go on standing! And living, too!"